

“Culture’s Clues to More Meaningful Worship”

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Introduction

How should the surrounding culture influence Christian corporate worship? Some argue that worship is for the “already committed.” Culture, therefore, should have no part in shaping Godly worship. Looking at contemporary culture, it would be easy to agree that the church’s worship must not be “squeezed into the world’s mold.” Others, citing the importance of “relevant” worship, believe culture must play at least some role in influencing our services. These persons convincingly argue that we must try “to be all things to all persons that by all means we might save some.”

Whatever our personal opinion, we cannot deny that the church is in culture, and culture is in the church. Leith Anderson observes, “We cannot view the church as an island isolated from the rest of society. It cannot be isolated. As the culture changes, the church changes.”¹ Because this is so, we are forced to grapple with the central question of this paper: How should the surrounding culture influence Christian corporate worship?

Two projects lay behind this paper: 1) During 1991-1994, a dissertation/project entitled “The Exegesis of Culture as a Critical Component of Christian Corporate Worship” was completed. It focused on the question addressed in this paper; 2) Concurrent with my research and writing, another experience significantly influenced me. As opportunity permitted, I visited major Protestant evangelical churches with strong, vibrant worship programs all across the country. My purpose was to carefully observe their worship services. I sought to better understand what God is blessing and doing in our land. What I saw was eye-opening! As senior pastor of West Side Church of the Nazarene in Wichita, Kansas, my conclusions naturally influenced my worship leadership.

This paper will discuss the clash between “culturally-sensitive worship” and “congregationally-sensitive worship.” We’ll consider the challenge this conflict presents, and conclude by suggesting at least one way to responsibly address the problem of competing worship styles in society today.

Let’s establish from the start that culture must not be allowed to dictate what Christian worship becomes. God, as He has revealed Himself supremely in Christ, but also in the Scriptures, is the controlling norm of worship. But for worship to genuinely involve people, culture must be a contributing consideration.

Perhaps the foundational insight that arose from my study of worship is this:

¹Leith Anderson, *Dying For Change* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1990), 43.

I. Culturally-sensitive worship often clashes with congregationally-sensitive worship.

Worship leaders, wanting to offer inspiring services that lift persons into the presence of God, face an immediate dilemma: the preferences of those in the congregation often differ greatly from the preferences of those outside the church. A cultural barrier exists between the typical worship patterns of most long-established congregations and the mind-set of those in the surrounding society. Certainly, many factors are involved, but one key element is the style of music used in worship.

The style of music preferred by those already in the church often differs greatly from the style most likely to attract persons presently outside the church.

Those of us who have grown up in the church hear the hymns, choruses and gospel songs of traditional Christian worship as “familiar friends,” Singing our favorite hymn can cause memories to flood in upon us. Positive associations attach to the songs we commonly sing. The emotional-connection to our hymnody is powerful. Howard Stevenson observes, “People especially treasure the music of their formative years, whether the popular music of their youth or the worship patterns of their most formative years spiritually.”²

But unchurched people don’t bring the same emotional attachments or appreciation to traditional Christian music. “Unchurched seekers experience our buildings, liturgies, stained-glass windows, organ music, ushers, offering plates, and ‘our people with their Sunday faces on as culturally alien, bizarre, and even intimidating.”³ The music we typically sing in church sounds strangely unfamiliar to their ears. Compared to the tunes they hear on their car radios, the church’s music sounds archaic. Because the music of traditional worship seems to them out-of-touch, many of these folks assume the church and its people to be out-of-touch and choose not to give the church, or the gospel, a hearing. Nor do they recommend the church to their friends.

The barrier these people find intimidating is not theological, but cultural. (Remember, Jesus himself never sang “Amazing Grace” or any of our other cherished favorites.) “They can only deal with the gospel when they have somehow worked through the cultural barrier”⁴--and a big part of the barrier lies in our music! “Business as usual” in worship, singing the same hymns, gospel songs and choruses, means these people will not be touched by the gospel. Increasingly, the church finds itself cut off from a large segment of society that desperately needs to hear the Gospel in a way they can appreciate.

²Howard Stevenson, “Creative Music and Worship”, Your Church (Winter 1993): 3W.

³George C. Hunter, How to Reach Secular People, 66-67.

⁴Ibid., 67.

The style of music used in worship largely determines the people to which a church will effectively minister.

The choice of music used in worship services is critical to evangelistic effectiveness. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church, observes: “Music is the most important factor in determining your evangelistic target, even more than preaching style. ... When you choose your music, you are determining exactly who you are going to reach and who you are not going to reach. More than any other factor, tell me what the music is in a church, and I will tell you who that church will be able to reach and who they will never be able to reach.”⁵

Having observed services of worship from California to Florida, from Atlanta to Chicago, I agree. Over and over again, I’ve seen churches retaining a traditional style of worship minister primarily to older congregations. But churches employing a more contemporary music typically attract younger worshippers. It would not be hard to accurately guess the average age of most congregations simply by hearing the style of music used in their worship.

The church, when it is most healthy, understands both its responsibility to worship and also its God-given mission to reach those who don’t yet know Christ.

We should clearly understand that worship is a distinct activity from evangelism. Yet, public worship is today most often the newcomer’s first exposure to the church. If we wish to see their lives changed by the Gospel, it is essential that we use styles and forms of worship to which they can easily relate. One study reports that Americans historically chose a church based on the criteria of 1) doctrine, 2) name, or 3) denomination. With the change of culture, this no longer holds true. Along with “quality ministry” and “beliefs that directly influence life-style,” as the number two and three factors, the most important factor involved in Americans choosing a church today is “*the style of worship*.”⁶ Our difficult task in services of public worship then is two-fold: 1) We must lead those presently committed to Christ Jesus to glorify and praise God; 2) while at the same time, we attempt to reach those who don’t yet call Jesus Lord. Because of these two diverse, if not mutually exclusive, responsibilities...

II. The church is challenged to find theologically-sound forms of worship which effectively ministers to those in the surrounding culture without forsaking those who presently comprise the local community of faith.

Admittedly, doing both is tough. Emotions of both traditional and change-oriented proponents run high. But the church cannot escape the twin challenges it faces in worship:

⁵Rick Warren as quoted by George Hunter, How to Reach Secular People. 151.

⁶Elmer L. Towns, Ten of Today’s Most Innovative Churches 197.

We face the challenge of ministering to the present community of faith.

I personally believe it is both unwise and irresponsible to abandon believers who have committed themselves to God and have faithfully supported the church for years. Their commitment to the Lord and the church deserves respect. Forsaking them by abandoning the style of worship they've been trained to love is irresponsible.

Preferred worship patterns of the present congregation have developed over many years. Gradually, these patterns took on deep meaning for those who are now accustomed to them. These patterns provide worshippers in a rapidly changing world with stability.

We also face the challenge of ministering to those who are presently outside the church but are unattracted by traditional patterns of worship.

What some perceive as stability, others see as stagnation. As we have already stated, we will not likely reach unchurched society by using traditional patterns of worship found in many congregations today. While it may be foolish to abandon those presently committed to the ongoing work of the church, it is also short-sighted and unfaithful to “write-off” as hopeless those unattracted to traditional patterns of worship. Unless we're able to bring a new generation of believers to commitment to Christ, the church is only a generation away from emptiness.

Eventually, if we are to impact our society, a bridge must be built between congregations and culture. Certainly, this will involve some “stretching.” Yet, “stretching” can be done while working within the boundaries of trust of those in the congregation. By laying a solid foundation of trust, the wise worship leader can carefully guide the congregation in the shaping of services of Christian corporate worship in a manner that effectively ministers to the present congregation and yet seeks to reach out to those who do not yet know and worship Jesus Christ as Lord. How might this be accomplished?

Adding a second service to the existing worship schedule that targets the unchurched is one way to attempt to reach a currently unchurched segment of the culture for God.

Each congregation presents unique challenges. No one “right way” exists that will accomplish the goals in all situations. Yet, we cannot escape the necessity of providing God-honoring worship while attempting to evangelize our world. One way of trying to stretch a traditional congregation to more effectively reach the surrounding culture is to add a second worship service aimed at those currently outside the church.

This pattern creates a new unit in the church structure that can more easily be shaped from the start. Instead of fighting traditional worship patterns, with the risk of alienating traditional worshippers, adding a second service provides the opportunity to expand the influence of the church without forsaking those who presently appreciate its tradition. The church gains the opportunity to attract people it would not otherwise reach, while beginning the “stretching” process of becoming more responsive to its surrounding culture.

Conclusion

James F. White comments, “There remains a persistent tension between worship and culture in which worship both affirms and criticizes the culture with which it must live. I am convinced that Christian worship has functions and forms that are distinct from any given culture, yet adaptable to all....There is, then, a constancy in Christian worship which is not culturally contingent, and yet [has] a dependency upon culture in order to minister to people.”⁷

Please notice, I advocate no particular style of worship except that the style employed should “custom-fit” the targeted audience. The decision of what style will best promote the evangelistic efforts of a given congregation must be left to the leadership of that local church. If “praise and worship” will reach their community best, that is the style to use. If “seeker-sensitive” or liturgical patterns promote drawing people to God, use them. Working within the safety of theological norms that guides all our efforts, let’s do what we must to effectively complete our God-given responsibilities to both worship and evangelize.

⁷James F. White, Christian Worship in Transition, 86.

Facing the Music: Choosing Your Worship Style

by Dr. Randy T. Hodges

Worship styles are a hot topic today. Will we use *a traditional* approach or will services be oriented to more *contemporary tastes*? Will the services be “*seeker sensitive*” or is worship for the “*already committed*”? And once we choose a style of worship, how do we implement the changes that choice implies?

Choosing a worship style is largely a matter of music. Rick Warren says, “Music is the most important factor in determining your evangelistic target, even more than preaching style. . . . When you choose your music, you are determining exactly who you are going to reach and who you are not going to reach. More than any other factor, tell me what the music is in a church, and I will tell you who that church will be able to reach and who they will never be able to reach.”¹ Musical style also drives people’s emotional response to worship.

Three key questions must be faced when we consider changing worship style. These same issues will often remain in tension as we plan and strategize:

1. To what style is the present congregation accustomed and how committed are they to that style?

The word of advice to heed: *Never underestimate the commitment to tradition.* “People especially treasure the music of their formative years, whether the popular music of their youth or the worship patterns of their most formative years spiritually.”²

We are unwise (no, just stupid) if we believe that forsaking established tradition is the quick and easy way to bring worship renewal to most already established congregations. *Don’t be stupid.*

2. What style probably best fits the make-up of your surrounding community or your “target audience?”

- Tim Keller, targeting a cultured population in downtown Manhattan, leads worship services rich in liturgy and classical music.³
- Doug Murren developed a style of worship intentionally aimed at “baby boomers.” “They will be drawn to music with a contemporary sound,” he says.⁴
- Bill Hybels in order to reach the secular-minded, “Unchurched Harry” devised a strategy of worship where “services feature lots of upbeat contemporary music, highly professional singing and clever skits.”⁵

None of these pastors lead your congregation in your community! Don’t imitate their style if it doesn’t fit the dynamics of your situation. Custom fit a worship strategy that fits your place of service.

3. What talent base in your congregation will supply the musicians, singers and support personnel to implement your proposed worship style changes?

- A congregation of 1,000 has a talent pool greater than the church of 500.
- A church of 250 deals with a base greater than a church of 100.
- A church of 100 has more resources than a church of 25.

Are those people who can make the service work willing to commit themselves to work with you in making it happen? *“Do what you can, with what you’ve got; where you are at.”*

¹Rick Warren as quoted by George C. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People*, 151.

²Howard Stevenson, “Creative Music and Worship”, *Your Church*, (Winter 1993): 3W.

³“What It Takes to Worship Well” *Leadership*, Spring, 1994, 17ff.

⁴Doug Murren, *The Baby Boomerang: Catching Baby Boomers as They Return to Church*, 188-189.

⁵Daily Herald, May 18, 1988, “Hybels: Why do 12,000 people listen to this man each week?”, 2.