Is It Too Loud?
Worship Accompaniment Vs. Worship Immersion Culture

A few years ago, after our worship gathering one Sunday morning, two very different people came to me. One was a young man in his late 20s, and the other was an older woman in her late 50s. After they spoke to me, I realized that there are two profoundly distinct "worship experience cultures" gathering in our churches today – and their diverse perspectives on worship are making the creation of effective gatherings a tremendous challenge.



The astute young man came to me first. "I hope you don't mind me saying this. *The music is too soft.* We can all hear each other singing, yes, but the energy has left the room. You guys are up there giving everything you've got, and the sound is at a level that sucks the life out of the music you're making. If you notice around the room, many people aren't engaging. When the volume is up, and the energy is high, the room rises. And that matters because people are inspired and stirred in their faith. Truth is, you guys seem like you're hearing something different through your monitors than we are, which makes you act like there's energy in the room that isn't actually there. Your passion leads us, but the soft music is distracting. It actually separates us rather than bringing us together."

The second older woman said, “Can I talk to you? The sound is too loud during the worship set. I can’t hear those around me singing, and sometimes I feel like you’re trying to be louder than the voices in the room. I find it difficult to connect when the music is louder than us singing. Could you please turn it down?”

Who is right? Do these different responses simply have to do with the *volume* of the music in the room?

The truth is, over 25 years of worship leading, I think they *both* are. These two people represent two ends of a spectrum emerging over the last 40+ years of contemporary worship culture. One is *Worship Accompaniment Culture*, and the other is *Worship Immersion Culture*. Still other subcultures fall in between these two, but they represent the ends of the spectrum when it comes to the music of worship.

Worship Accompaniment Culture – *Support Us With The Music*

The first subculture within our congregations is what I call the *Worship Accompaniment Culture*. When the musical portion of worship is happening, either on a Sunday morning or at an event (everyone is more forgiving, it seems, at non-Sunday am events), they want to be *accompanied and supported* by the band. For them, hearing the voices of others around them, mingling in harmony or shared enthusiasm, is their ideal worship environment. Sure, they may have listened to the music “loud” when they were younger, but “loud” had a different meaning than it does today.

I’ve also noticed that this culture is often more “melody” driven – in other words, the more melodic, straightforward, and singable the song is, the better. It’s all about us, *singing together*. A president of a respected seminary in Canada is a friend of mine. One time we were sitting across from each other at a table at an award ceremony. He leaned in, and with passionate curiosity said, “Dan, please explain to us why so much worship music today lacks a memorable melody. I can’t stand it, but many of my students love it. Why? I can barely sing it with them!”

My friend represents the Worship Accompaniment Culture, in many ways. He wants us to sing together, and to hear each other singing as we do it. In some cases, this group can handle high performance moments, such as choirs, instrumentals, or other expressions that are less explicitly corporate in nature. But make a performance out of the 15-30 minute worship set, and even have some of it be inaccessible melodically? Then we have a problem.

Imagine this worship subculture in our churches gathered around a piano. This is their vision of what feels “right” in worship.

To some degree, I can identify with this worship subculture. I get it. I am drawn to very acoustic environments where our shared sense of comradery in worship is very high.

A good friend of mine, Jeremiah Carlson of the band *The Neverclaim* suggests that there is a significant transition going on between generations in worship environments, and it complicates how we think about worship leadership. There was a time when people were singing *about God*, and the great shift in congregations and individuals was that they began to sing directly *to God* in their songs. Enter the contemporary worship movement of the 70s (almost 50 years ago), 80s, and even 90s. While that was a precious and important shift, he suggested that something else is emerging with the younger set raised in the environs of the 90s, 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s (we’re almost there).

These people represent what I will call Worship Immersion Culture, and I strongly identify with this group as well.

Worship Immersion Culture – *Surround Us With The Music*

Worship Immersion Culture is not *primarily* drawn to sing *about God*, nor even do they always feel a need to sing *to God.* Rather, they are a generation that wants to sing *with God*. They want to participate in God's life, and be propelled by worship encounters into a world that is begging them to live out their worship incarnationally – manifesting Christ's presence in all aspects of life.

Raised to listen to their music in headphones and concerts, they want to be *surrounded* by the music in a corporate environment. In many cases, they don't feel as though they *must* sing in order to engage individually – or even corporately. They are content to experience the beauty happening in the room – they want to *feel* the music and the lyrics in their bones. They feel close to others in the room when we are all *sharing* the same experience – when we are all surrounded by, and participating in/with, the music filling our shared space. (I might suggest that while many of my friends are critiquing this idea as malforming, even as they read this, I would suggest this subculture may ultimately be less "churchy" in their approach to Life Worship than preceding worship cultures.)

They appreciate melody it seems, but appreciate ambience, environment, groove, and texture just as much. Like standing under Michelangelo's dome in St. Peter's Cathedral or listening to a magnificent choir, they are content to be a part of something that requires reflection as much as it does an internal participation. They are content to be *moved*, as well as to *move with* the music.

Imagine this worship subculture, in contrast to the first, *surrounded* by the band. This is their vision of what feels "right" in worship. Us, together, in a room, having a shared experience *with God*.

We Are Formed By Our Worship Habits

Now, for this post, I am speaking to churches engaged primarily in contemporary worship practices. I am a fan of Jamie Smith's *Cultural Liturgies Series* (some of my favorite worship work to date), and I understand the formation/malformation that is occurring when our service orders are minimally participatory, and not critically thought through in how they are forming us as real disciples. I am for patterns, for liturgies, for the "expected" and for the "extemporaneous" within the expected. One of my dearest friends is the Chaplain for Robert Webber's Institute For Worship Studies, and many of my dearest friends have studied/are studying the riches of the four-fold service and more. In fact, I've taught courses on the historic four-fold service through Indiana Wesleyan and St. Stephen's University.

But I'm also a contemporary worship leader in the Vineyard movement of churches, and I know the transformation that can occur in people when they are given a long time to sing to God, about God, and with God in a thoughtful worship environment. I'm also not averse to the music playing a larger role in a worship gathering, and to it being loud enough to move feet and hearts that welcome being surrounded by the music. And while the medium is the message, yes, I think sometimes our Worship Cultural paradigms are a lens through which we are seeing as we eschew another's approach to worship.

The problem is not just our volume or song selection – it is also our approach to *participation* in our services.

Fixing The Problem Of Participation – When The Music Is The Only Opportunity

I'm going to contend that both worship cultures I've mentioned have a different vision of *participation* in worship, and neither is perfect.

Because many more contemporary church movements have removed highly participatory, few thousand-year-old worship elements from their weekly gatherings (Eucharist/communion, responsive readings, corporate prayers, passing of the peace, fellowship), the music must be *everything* when it comes to corporate

participation in worship. The pastor will speak for 30-45 minutes, and people are starving to participate (in a non-personally intrusive way) when the dominant part of their gatherings is teaching – and long teachings at that.

Today, however, many of the Worship Immersion Culture ilk are excited to re-integrate a *variety of more participatory worship experiences*, from singing together, to experiencing beauty together, to weekly communion, to responsive prayers, to the passing of the peace, and much more.

They don't *need* the music to accomplish *all things participatory* in the conventional sense of the word. They can be surrounded by the music in one moment, and breaking the bread together with a few shared words in the next. In fact, the aesthetics of the building, the type of art adorning the building, the fellowship spaces (cafe areas, etc.), and the missional spaces (food distribution areas, etc.) matter to them *as much as the music*. Buildings, for the Worship Immersion Culture, matter beyond their function. They are a part of the message being communicated about how we live, as friend James Bryant Smith and Renovare call it, the *With-God Life*.

We should all be asking the question: *What are our opportunities for deep community participation on a Sunday morning, and are we discipling our entire congregation by our planning?*

When we name our target group according to age or demographic, we must embrace that *it means something* for the way we handle the music – from the volume, to the presentation, to the way we host worship gatherings.

Getting Our Worship Cultures Out Of A Rut

I'll shoot straight. When it comes to planning a Sunday morning, in my experience many pastors are not thinking much beyond the worship conventions with which they grew up or in which had their first encounters with God. I include myself in this; it's not easy.

But if we'll recognize various worship cultures exist in our churches (over time it does get more homogenous), care about how people are being formed by our worship habits, and tend to who God has called us to uniquely be as a community, we'll find our local stride in leading people into worship places that are truly forming them in Christ-likeness.

If forming people in Christ is the business of the Church, then worship is the business of the Church. Let's be about our business.

Question: How can we better handle, in our churches, the tension of serving both worship cultures mentioned above in our planning? Where do you fall between these two approaches?

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