

Congregational Worship

The Art of Leading Congregational Worship True Worship: Acknowledging Authority and Power Weightier Worship

The Art of Leading Congregational Worship

Stand to Reason, Amy Hall

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I suspect you've seen this in church before: The worship band begins to play a well-known hymn. The congregation confidently joins in. Then the band creatively adds a little unexpected extra space between stanzas, and a few people get caught singing loudly through the silence. Everyone is immediately on guard, hesitant. Sometimes we recover, but as the creative liberties increase, the number of people worshipping steadily decreases. We wait quietly, listening, watching the band worship as our limited time together slips away.

The art of leading congregational worship is being lost, and I think we are all poorer for it. James K.A. Smith sums up very well my thoughts on this in his "[An Open Letter to Praise Bands](#)":

1. ***If we, the congregation, can't hear ourselves, it's not worship.*** Christian worship is not a concert. In a concert (a particular "form of performance"), we often expect to be overwhelmed by sound, particularly in certain styles of music. In a concert, we come to expect that weird sort of sensory deprivation that happens from sensory overload, when the pounding of the bass on our chest and the wash of music over the crowd leaves us with the rush of a certain aural vertigo. And there's nothing wrong with concerts! It's just that Christian worship is not a concert. Christian worship is a collective, communal, congregational practice--and the gathered sound and harmony of a congregation singing *as one* is integral to the practice of worship. It is a way of "performing" the reality that, in Christ, we are one body. But that requires that we actually be able to hear ourselves, and hear our sisters and brothers singing alongside us. When the amped sound of the praise band overwhelms congregational voices, we can't hear ourselves sing--so we lose that communal aspect of the congregation and are encouraged to effectively become "private," passive worshipers.

2. ***If we, the congregation, can't sing along, it's not worship.*** In other forms of musical performance, musicians and bands will want to improvise and "be creative," offering new renditions and exhibiting their virtuosity with all sorts of different trills and pauses and improvisations on the received tune. Again, that can be a delightful aspect of a concert, but in Christian worship it just means that we, the congregation, can't sing along. And so your virtuosity gives rise to our passivity; your creativity simply encourages our silence. And while *you* may be worshipping *with* your creativity, the same creativity actually shuts down congregational song.

Worship leaders, if you look out over the congregation and you see that we are not singing with you, something has gone wrong. Are you jamming alone up there for extended periods of time? Are you changing well-known melodies just enough to surprise us and make us hesitant to sing out, and/or adding flair that we can't follow? Are you choosing soloistic songs with complicated melodies rather than musically simple ones designed for group singing?

The best thing you can do is to consider carefully the purpose of your role as you make your decisions for each service. You have the noble position of enabling all of us to draw together as one before God to express our love and honour through a powerful medium. If you can keep that goal in mind—the goal of enabling the *congregation* to worship—and ruthlessly shed anything, however musically tempting, that doesn't advance that goal, we will thank you.

True Worship: Acknowledging Authority and Power

Martin Luther (*taken from Treasury of Daily Prayer, Concordia Publishing House*):

[Worship] is not a function of the mouth but of the whole body. It is to bow the head, bend the body, fall on the knees, prostrate one's self, and so forth, and to do such things as a sign and acknowledgment of an authority and power greater than self. Just as people bow in one form or another in silence before secular princes and Lords, and just as popes, bishops, abbots, and people generally, have themselves honoured and adored by bowing and kneeling, and so forth. Such outward adoration of the bending of the body is what the Scriptures really mean by worship. We read in the Scriptures that worship or adoration is rendered outwardly both to God and to kings without distinction, just as bowing and kneeling are still rendered outwardly both to God and to men.

From this understanding of outward worship, you will also understand what Christ meant by true spiritual worship. It is the adoration or bowing of the heart, so that from the bottom of your heart you are to thereby show and confess yourself to be God's subordinate creature who owes all to Him. For from this you see that true worship can only arise from faith; it is faith's sublime activity with respect to God. For no one is able to offer such heartfelt confession, adoration, bending, and bowing of the heart (or whatever you want to call it) before God in his heart, unless he unwaveringly believes and holds God Almighty to be his Lord and Father, from whom he receives and will receive all good things, and through whom, without any merit or worthiness on his part, he is redeemed and preserved from all sins and evil.

Weightier Worship

Does modern worship need a dose of doctrine (and imagination)?

Brett McCracken <http://magazine.biola.edu/article/10-fall/weightier-worship/>

Last spring, evangelicals across America were abuzz when Atlanta's North Point Community Church released "*Sunday's Coming*," a short film that parodied contemporary evangelical worship. The popularity of that video — which went viral across Facebook and Twitter and dominated chatter for weeks on the Christian blogosphere — is a testament to the accuracy of (and our familiarity with) its depiction of contemporary worship. Featuring a stereotypical evangelical church with formulaic rock music ("lights

and big drums”) and laughably predictable worship leader banter (“I’d like to invite the ushers to come...”), the video was a hilarious, slightly disturbing reminder of how silly our worship can look from a distance.

“*Sunday’s Coming*” raises questions about the homogeneity and shallow predictability of contemporary worship. Many evangelical churches in America today share a very identifiable style of worship music: a five-piece band with electric guitars, singing U2-sounding songs about God’s love written by Hillsong or Matt Redman. The experience of “*worship music*” has become formulaic, standardized and narrowly conceived within much of evangelicalism. In some cases, it is simply the “*thing we do*” for 25 minutes before the pastor preaches a sermon.

How can we go deeper in our worship? How can we make it more meaningful and less worthy of parody? And how can we make worship more about “*we*” the church than “*me*” the consumer, but above all about God?

Worship as a Hammer

Fundamental to any discussion of worship is the question of its intended role in the Christian life. Andrew Braine (M.Div. ’06), who teaches in Biola’s *Music in Worship* program, suggests that **the practice of worship music in the church is inextricably tied to our ecclesiology, or understanding of what we are there to do when we gather as God’s people.**

“*In the East, corporate worship is a window so that we can see what’s happening in heaven,*” said Braine. “*In the West, worship is seen more as a hammer. It does something.*”

Braine says that in our Western evangelical context, worship often seems to be largely about cause and effect — getting people in the door so that they might get saved. Within this utilitarian framework, notes Braine, our styles of worship often veer toward elaborate production, performance spectacle, and highly emotional experiences that are audience-friendly and, yes, “*seeker-sensitive.*”

But Braine, who is teaching an integration seminar on music as worship this fall with Bible professor David Horner, worries about what this “*hammer*” approach does to our experience of worship.

“*Worship should not be a marketing tool to get people in the door or to appeal to a certain demographic,*” he said. “***Worship should be about shaping your congregation’s practical view of who God is.***”

Braine thinks the style of worship today — favouring simple, easy-to-play guitar riffs, soaring emotional melodies and repetitive lyrics — comes out of the audience-friendly, path-of-least-resistance approach. Among the most troubling aspects of this style for Braine is the heavy emphasis on emotionalism and ecstatic experience.

While this sort of exciting, emotional worship might draw in crowds and appeal to seekers, the problem, says Braine, is that it creates an assumption that ecstatic experience in worship is normative or expected.

“*When people don’t experience it, there’s this sense of ‘I’m doing something wrong. Maybe I’m not really saved. Maybe God’s not really speaking to me,’*” he said. “*Then you’re at a crossroads. To avoid cognitive dissonance, you have to decide either ‘I need to try harder to trump up that mystical experience’ or ‘I tried Christianity and it didn’t work.’*”

The problem with using worship as a means to bring people in is that, once they are “*in,*” they don’t necessarily get the depth of biblical understanding that matches up to

the worship that initially drew them in, says Braine. Thrilling, visceral, spiritually moving worship might attract them to the church, but invariably those feelings won't last forever, and then what are they left with? Stripped of its emotional impact, does our worship say anything about who God is or what we believe he did?

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi

One way we can make sure our worship is offering something more substantial than mere emotion, says Braine, is to approach it with the mind-set of *lex orandi, lex credendi*: “*That which is prayed is that which is believed.*”

Our worship music should articulate what we believe.

“If we are praying or singing things together as a congregation that are shallow or disconnected, we are not succeeding in forming Christians to be the people of God,” said Braine, who believes worship pastors should be intentional about choosing songs and leading a service that is deep, meaningful and every bit as truth-filled as the pastor's sermon.

Walt Harrah, a music pastor who leads three Sunday morning services at Grace Evangelical Free Church in La Mirada, laments the disconnect between a church's “*singing time*” and “*sermon time*,” because ultimately both should be seen as worship. Harrah, who also teaches in Biola's *Music in Worship* program, uses “*worship scripts*” that incorporate carefully selected songs, Scripture and written prayers in worship, all thematically integrated based on the topic of that Sunday's biblical teaching.

Harrah, an established session musician and writer of such songs as “*Think About His Love*,” agrees with Braine that worship music shouldn't pander to the audience or assume they can't handle complexity or depth in worship.

“*Just give people the real God,*” suggests Braine. “*The real, triune, tough-to-figure-out God. Don't try to guess which sort of God people want to encounter.*”

Dan Radmacher ('90, M.Div. '04), who leads the contemporary service at Sierra Madre Congregational Church near Pasadena, thinks that worship should be less about making us feel good and more about fundamentally changing who we are as the people of God.

“*The words that the spiritual formation community uses are consolation and desolation,*” says Radmacher. “*Probably a lot more desolation should be happening in worship. It should be more of the Isaiah 6 ‘woe is me’ experience. If you really are experiencing the greatness and glory of God, then you're going to realize what a worm you really are. And that's not a bad thing. It drives you to worship. When I lead worship, I really want him to pierce our hearts with the truth of who he is. I would say that confining worship to ‘celebration’ is a little bit crazy.*”

Ultimately, we need to turn our eyes to God and away from ourselves, adds Radmacher.

“*It's really hard to find songs that are focused simply on who God is,*” says Radmacher. “*There are a lot of songs about my response to God in worship, but songs that focus on him should be our bread and butter. 2 Corinthians 3 says if we gaze on God's glory we change; not if we focus on ourselves. So much worship music is focused not on God but on my experience of God. If a whole service is comprised of those types of songs, I just don't see how that's transformational.*”

Moving Away From “Me”-Centered Worship

Because so much of contemporary worship has been of the audience-friendly, “*hammer*” variety, it's only natural that it has taken on a strong individualistic bent. It makes sense that “*worship wars*” are rampant in churches, as we argue over our own particular tastes and the way we think worship ought to be. But should worship really be about “*me and my individual encounter with God,*” or are we missing a crucial community component?

If we move away from the “*me*” mentality, says Braine, worship music can become a great source of unity in the church.

“It gives us an opportunity for humility, because I’m not going to hear what I think I want to hear all the time, and that’s fine,” said Braine. *“The community should come before my own individual preferences, and we should take delight in seeing others enjoy a song even if we don’t.”* Braine also thinks that worship music can create a broader unity among the church universal as an activity where the brotherhood of Christ can play out.

“Why not sing a song that was written by a persecuted pastor in the underground church in China?” he says. *“Then as a congregation, take a few moments to pray for the persecuted church?”*

One of the factors contributing to evangelical worship’s “*me-centric*” disposition has been its tendency to frame the activity in terms of performance and musical excellence.

Though the emphasis on “*excellence*” of craft and musicianship is understandable, Braine thinks that excessive excellence draws attention to the music and the individual performance of it, which can distract us from the actual experience of worship.

Walt Harrah agrees, noting that **while excellence is good, its importance is sometimes overrated.**

He likes to tell the story of being at Mariner’s Church in Irvine, Calif., 20 years ago and watching in embarrassment and horror as a woman sang the words of John 3:16 to the tune of “*The House of the Rising Sun.*” A few years later at a Christmas party he met a lady and asked her how she met the Lord, and she said, *“Well, I was at Mariner’s Church one morning and heard someone sing John 3:16 to ‘House of the Rising Sun’ and I committed my life to Christ.”*

“This is not an excuse to be sloppy in our quality,” said Harrah. *“But I think excellence gets overrated.”*

In her recent *Worship Leader* magazine article, “*Return of the Folk,*” Constance Cherry — a church worship consultant and professor of worship at Indiana Wesleyan University — calls for **a shift from the performance-driven “*program worship*” to a more “*participatory worship,*” which is less about whether I am pleased and more about whether God is pleased.** Participatory worship, writes Cherry, is about “*experiencing the presence of the risen Christ in the fellowship of community.*”

But how do we foster a community-focused, collectivist worship culture that isn’t totally homogenous and predictable? And how do we do it in a way that both honours our shared traditions and values innovation and diversity?

Balancing the New and the Old

Maybe it happened in 1998 with the arrival of British worship band Delirious? or maybe it was the 2000 release of Third Day’s Offerings worship album, but at some point around the turn of the millennium, worship music became the new focal point of the contemporary Christian music industry.

Because of this shift, more and more Christian musicians today are making worship music and more worship songs are making the rounds to churches. Worship pastors at even small churches are writing their own music and releasing worship albums, and all of it adds up to an increasingly flooded market of worship music.

Coupled with the fact that audiences have shorter attention spans and (presumably) demand new content more regularly, the shelf life of any given worship song is shorter than ever, and worship pastors often feel the pressure to play the latest song, says Walt Harrah.

“I really like the song ‘God of Wonders,’ but that was a really big song in like 2002,” he says. “Would it be OK to sing it now, or is it passé? Everything is so throwaway and ephemeral today — even worship songs.”

Harrah is concerned that the culture’s obsession with “new,” coupled with the “everyone is a worship songwriter” trend, might lead to a lost commonality of song within Christianity. “The worship song movement does elevate certain songs that show up in every church, where everyone will know it,” he says. “But most of the time when you go into a church, they will have their own canon of songs they sing. Wherever you worship, you’re bound to sing a song you’ve never heard before. There are a lot of really bad songs out there that shouldn’t be sung, and the whole narcissistic focus of home-grown songs just fosters this.”

Radmacher writes original music for his church, but doesn’t do it as much as he used to because he also sees the value in a broader commonality of song.

“Part of me likes the idea of churches in an area singing the same music,” he says. “I kind of want my congregation to know the songs in a given area, and if we’re doing all my own songs then they aren’t going to.”

On the other hand, Radmacher believes that new songs can help us to worship in ways that old songs can’t, inject life into tired worship styles and re-imagine the possibilities of what worship music can be.

One artist currently making waves in the worship world is John Mark McMillan, the writer of “How He Loves” whose recently released album *The Medicine* debuted at No. 1 on iTunes’ Christian album sales charts. With his distinctive Springsteen-esque roots rock sound, McMillan hopes he can create “new associations” in people’s minds about what worship can be (read Biola Magazine’s exclusive interview with McMillan).

Linzy Spann, senior Music in Worship major and singer/keyboardist of the band *The Fragrance*, is another example of someone actively trying to broaden our understanding of worship music.

Spann, who has been leading worship in Biola chapel services with *The Fragrance* since her freshman year, believes “there’s something precious about diversity within our worship music — hymns, multicultural songs, praise music — which we miss when we stick to the typical homogenous styles.”

Her band, the *Fragrance*, which is currently recording a full-length album, plays music that combines eclectic indie-rock style with biblical themes and lyrics. (One song, “Awake My Soul!” incorporates a Hebrew praise chorus at the end.)

For *The Fragrance*, musical diversity and innovation is prioritized, as well as depth of lyrics. This reflects the emphases of the *Music in Worship* program at Biola, which requires students to spend their first two years being classically trained with classes like music theory and music history.

Bands like *The Fragrance* — who play old hymns in their worship sets alongside original songs — represent a new face of worship music for young evangelicalism: music that is quality, creative, thoughtful, forward-thinking and yet mindful of tradition.

Though the temptations of trendiness and the notion of worship as performance/attraction will probably not go away, Spann has learned through her time at Biola that the best bet for a worship leader is to simply remember that, at the end of the day, worship should be all about God.

“Worship is about the created ascribing worth to the Creator,” said Spann. “Worship music brings us together as a community to ascribe worth to our creator. It’s an incredible gift that God has given us.”