

An Audience of One

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1 Chronicles 16:28-34

*...how can we
keep God at
the center of
our worship...
life?*

Worship has become a divisive issue in American churches today. Conflicts over worship in general and music in particular have erupted in churches all over our land. In church vernacular, we call it “worship wars.”

The conflict centers on music. The kind of music a church offers increasingly defines the kind of person who attends. Music is fast becoming the locus of self-understanding in our culture, especially among the emerging generation.

Some churches offer a menu of worship options for the worshipper. You can attend whatever service at which your favorite music is played.

Actually, there are two primary options available to the worshipper—traditional and contemporary. Traditional, when it is used to describe a worship style, is often a code word for “The way we’ve always done it.” When I see churches offering contemporary worship, I often wonder who gets to define what is contemporary? Do they mean contemporary jazz, country western, blues, hip-hop, rap or rock and roll?

This church attempts to intentionally blend ancient and modern worship forms. At worst, we frustrate everybody. We don’t sing enough of either style to satisfy

anybody. At best, we are able to introduce modern forms of worship to traditionalists and ancient worship forms to post-modernists.

The debate over church music is nothing new. When J.S. Bach went to his first church in Muhlhausen, a controversy erupted as to whether Bach’s technically demanding music was an asset or detriment to pure worship. Maybe this explains why Bach remained there only nine months.

According to Charles Finney’s lectures in Revival in 1835, it took churches a century to adapt to Isaac Watt’s hymn tunes, including Joy to the World, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross and Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun. Finney said, “People in various congregations continue to walk out of church if a psalm or hymn is taught from the new book. And if Watt’s psalms were adopted, they would split and form a new congregation rather than tolerate such innovation.”

The debate between traditional and contemporary worship styles misses the whole point. Never mind which style of music appeals to you. We must ask ourselves, how can we keep God at the center of our worship and community life? We ought to give more consideration to why we worship rather than how we worship. What, after all, are we doing here today? Why do we worship?

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1st Chronicles 16 describes an ancient worship service. The safe return of the sacred Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem was what occasioned this worship. The Ark of the Covenant was essentially a wooden chest lined in gold containing the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The Ark symbolized God's presence to people in much the same way Holy Communion represents Christ's presence among us today. David went to great lengths in chapters 13-15 to return this Ark to its rightful place, in much the same way Indiana Jones risked his life recovering the Ark in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

When the Ark was properly installed, the people of God gathered to worship. David contributed three Psalms to the service, reciting from Psalms 105, 106 and 96 (which comprise the words of our Scripture lesson). I invite you to follow along in 1st Chronicles 16:28-34. I will briefly mention four essential worship elements and then devote more attention to one in particular.

1. Worship centers on God. "Ascribe to the Lord, glory and strength; ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name" (16:28-29). Worship is not about me and it's not about you. God is the object and subject of our worship.

2. Worship incorporates offering. "Bring an offering and come before him" (16:29). "Don't come before me empty handed," God says in Exodus (23:15; 34:20). Bring your material resources—your time and money. Bring your

spiritual resources—your hearts and minds. "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (51:17).

3. Worship creates awe and wonder. "Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth" (16:30). The trembling David speaks of here is not a cowering sense of fear but a profound sense of awe and reverence. We've lost our sense of awe in the church to-day. Jesus has been reduced to our cosmic buddy and brother. I've got news for you—this Jesus, who is our buddy, is also the Lord of infinite majesty.

4. Worship involves celebration. "Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice, and let them say among the nations, The Lord is king.' Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever" (16:31-34).

This worship service rocks! David assigns someone to play the cymbals and others to blow the trumpets (16:6). Check out 1 Chronicles 13:8. David and his people "...were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with lyres, harps, tambourines, cymbals and trumpets."

Worship celebrates God, which doesn't mean we only sing happy, upbeat music. Songs of lament give voice to our pain and suffering. But worship in Scripture is also celebratory. It baffles me how some people

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can get so fired up about the Redskins one day and then, come the next day, sit on their hands.

Each ingredient of worship is worthy of more consideration, but, in the interest of time, let me return to the first point, that worship centers on God.

Worship is for God. Everything is due Him. Worship derives from the Old English word “woerth,” meaning “worth-ship.” In other words, worship gives to God what’s He’s worth. God is eminently worthy to receive our praise.

It is tempting to make my needs and my wants the center of worship. Worship isn’t strictly utilitarian. Worship is what we offer God. More accurately, it’s what God offers us in Jesus Christ.

Worship is not contingent on how I feel. What a relief, because half the time, if truth be told, I don’t feel much like worshipping. Why should that surprise you— half the time you don’t feel like going to school or work, but you still go. But it is precisely in the act of worship that my feelings for God are ignited once again.

Some Sundays I come, aware of God’s nearness and presence in the previous week. Other Sundays I come, having experienced God’s otherness and apparent hiddenness. Yet, still I come, confident God will make good on His yet-to-be-fulfilled promises.

If worship is for God and not for me, I can use whatever worship is at my disposal to grow in faith.

Some people have the attitude, if worship doesn’t suit my worship tastes, then I can’t worship. But if worship is about God and not about me, it doesn’t really matter whether worship suits my worship style.

For the next three months, our sermons will focus on the kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to model his kingdom in the way we live our lives and treat one another. Jesus intended his church to be an outpost of the kingdom of God among the kingdoms of this world. We don’t live by the values of this culture— values of consumerism and self-satisfaction. He intended his church to be a viable alternative to worldly kingdoms. I suspect the reason our neighbors don’t come to church has nothing to do with whether we sing contemporary or traditional music. It has everything to do with whether we are living this faith we profess. If this faith we profess isn’t changing our lives, it doesn’t matter what we do in worship.

We don’t come to church, we are the church. We come to worship precisely to learn how to become the church.

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish writer and Christian philosopher who lived in the first half of the 19th century. His book *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* gives instructions about how to listen to a sermon. He advises his readers not to focus on critiquing the preacher but rather to use the sermon as a catalyst to Christian maturity.

Kierkegaard recognized the tendency of churches to view wor-

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ship leaders as the actors, God as the prompter to help the leaders remember their lines and congregations as the audience who critique and pass judgment on the actors.

That's often the way we view worship. We sit, waiting for the service to start, in much the same way that people wait for a play to begin. Our job is to critique the performance. How did Pete do? How did the choir do? Did I get anything out of the service? But to Kierkegaard's way of thinking, we've got it all wrong. The question we should be asking ourselves is how did we do in worship today? Kierkegaard regarded the congregation as the actors, the worship leaders as the prompters to help the congregation remember their lines and God as the audience, the one who evaluates what is done.

The title for this sermon, "An Audience of One," originates with Puritan preachers the likes of John Cotton, Anne Hutchinson and Richard Baxter. The meaning of the phrase is rather simple. Everything we do as Christians is for an audience of one.

All of us, whether we are aware of it or not, do things with an eye to the approval of some audience. The question is not whether we have an audience but which audience we have. Only madmen and egotists do things purely for themselves. Youth and adults alike play to their peers. Pastors anxiously follow the latest trends in seeker-sensitive services. Politicians pander to the polls. In this

election year, we would do well to remember something Harry Truman once said: "I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt."

A life lived before an audience of one trumps all other audiences. Those who perform before an audience of one can afford to be careless about lesser audiences. Before them I have nothing to prove, nothing to gain, nothing to lose. To live life before an audience of one makes all the difference!

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