"Here I Am to Worship:"
Conflicting Authenticities in Contemporary Christian Congregational Singing

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Over the past 10 to 15 years, the congregational singing of many western, white, Protestant Christians has undergone a significant shift. This is a prominent manifestation of the various ways in which many churches, especially those of the evangelical camp, are attempting to re-define and restructure themselves in ways thought to be more relevant to post-modern culture. These changes take many forms, some being copies of methods and philosophies of the so-called mega-churches of the United States while others are much more experimental and responsive to local circumstances. In some cases, congregations have grown and flourished as a result of change while others have suffered serious conflict and disruption in the clash of cultural forces.

One of the most obvious areas of change in Sunday services has been in congregational singing. Once characterized by congregants holding hymnals, singing four part chorale structures or revivalist gospel songs accompanied by organ and/or piano, it is now probable that one will encounter worshippers standing, sometimes in semi-darkness, reading projected texts of simple, repetitive songs – choruses – set to music derived from popular styles, accompanied by guitars, keyboards, drums and led by groups of amplified singers.

The model of "contemporary" style, also referred to as "Praise and Worship," presents mostly short songs, often called choruses, in a format of continuous music or "free-flowing praise" (Liesch, 2001). In its most developed form, the accompanying band or Worship Team provides a non-stop background of music throughout the entire time given for musical worship activity. Over this sound track, between the songs the leader (a member of the Worship Team) might offer short prayers of adoration, verses of scripture or verbal encouragements to enhance the worship atmosphere. The congregational singing is started *ad libitum* by the worship leader, coordinated with the backup band and each song flows from one to the other, often with many repetitions of sections of the songs. Between songs, no pauses are necessary in order to find the worship songs in a hymnal because the texts are usually projected on a screen. This too facilitates the flow of singing in the service.

Contemporary congregational singing can last from 10 to 45 minutes, depending on the church, and it is not unusual for the gathered worshippers to stand for most of this time. Singing will stop for preaching and perhaps resume afterwards for a short while. One benefit derived from this format is that a state of worshipful feelings can be developed in the worshippers by the uninterrupted musical environment. This engendered emotional affect is central to the success of the contemporary style and is thought to be difficult to achieve within the stop and start format of a traditional service.

The Competition for Sonic Space

The Worship Team or Praise Band is designated as leaders of worship, with one member taking the obvious lead. What they are said to be doing is leading worship, and often this may be spoken of as "leading the congregation into the presence of God." What the gathered people do is "worship." In the course of my research, it was extremely rare to hear congregational music-making referred to as singing; in conversation, congregational singing is worship.

A young woman told me this story:

> The one thing that I don't like about the new choruses is to go to church and watch the band sing…When we were looking for churches, we spent about six months going to different churches and there were a few churches where you were just a spectator for the whole thing and you look around and you're one of 10 people actually singing. You're not sure if you're actually supposed to be singing or if they just have the words up there so you can look at them. I think volume was a big part of it as well as bad acoustics. You can't hear yourself sing, so it's difficult to sing but there really is no need for you to sing. It's being done for you. It was fairly distracting to know that there were so few people who were worshipping with you and that you were kind of an oddity because you were singing and it's very frustrating when you're trying actually to listen to the people singing around you and all you hear is the guitar.

An older man recalled his experience with the leader/musicians.

> I've visited a church where I personally had trouble singing. The first thing that comes to mind is the volume - it's a small church, physically. The congregation's small too. And yet it somewhat disturbs me that they feel they needed to use microphones right up to the mouth, and fairly loud. I was not aware of people around me singing because of the volume from the band, and there were only four of them… into the microphones, the amplification of the music, the instrumentation; it seems to be more related to a group in a concert, making a presentation as opposed to wanting us to be part of them, of what is being said [sic]. By contrast, the team at our church expects us to sing and the whole presentation they have is one of "we're helping you, we're leading you." We just know that. I guess the volume is one thing. The vocals and the instrumentation are at a level that is clearly, to me, supportive. The instrumentation is supportive to the congregational singing and the volume of the voices of those who are singing, while they're there, particularly if we're learning something new, they are very clear. But once the congregation catches on it's always sort of participatory. If I were coming into the congregation as someone new, I would realize that everybody was singing and feel that I wanted to be a part of it. So maybe it's developed over a period of time. But to contrast the two, the worship team in the other church dominates whereas at our church, there's clearly a sense of providing leadership and "we want you to participate."

These stories describe one area of conflict that impacts congregational singing; it seems that the role of the musician-leaders and their relationship to the congregation can be a source of confusion and frustration for some worshippers. What then is the function of the musicians up front? Are they facilitators? Are they accompanists? Are they performers?

Stan Godlovitch (1998) offers insights into the nature of performance. He says:

> Unlike rehearsals, exploratory sight-reading, recreational practice, and other player-centered activities, performances are specifically and directly intended, designed or meant for audiences. As purposeful activities, their *telos* is to be experienced by those for whom the performer prepares them. (p. 28)

The Worship Team is making music for other people with a specific purpose. What is the *telos* (end, purpose) of the band and how is this experienced by those for whom they prepare? Is the band a kind of performing group? Are they accompanists to the congregation or something else? I submit that there are no simple answers to these questions.

Unlike the organ or piano accompanying hymns, the worship band is a self-contained musical entity because it includes amplified singers; the congregation is not needed to complete the ensemble. The models for the Worship Teams are commercial rock and pop bands which are not intentionally constructed as sing-a-long ensembles. In the recent past, unrehearsed communal singing was invited in a few popular practices: if you are old enough you may remember the music of "Sing along with Mitch" (follow the bouncing ball) or folk songs sung in small intimate venues or at Hootenannies. In these kinds of musical events, it was intended that the "folk" sing with the musicians on stage and their use of acoustic instruments with sound re-enforcement (as different from amplification) reflected and allowed for this. However, since the 60's, most song forms popular in the youth culture use highly amplified instrumentation and are presented by personalities in a manner that is performative, stylized, visceral, very often within a spectacular entertainment format. And this also applies to the parallel world of Christian popular music. As a member of an audience (literally the hearers) you can sing along if you like – it's part of the fun – but it adds nothing to the sound of the show unless deliberately included as a novelty, and almost always without the band playing at their normal volume.

By contrast, in the setting of a church worship service, the congregation expects to make an important contribution to the music of praise and not be an audience for an apparent performance. Their singing is meant to be heard as it is the people's musical offering of worship (liturgy) and is central to their purpose – they came to church to worship in song. I maintain that they are the most important musicians in the room and it is obvious that organists and worship bands are able to adjust their volume levels in favour of the congregational voice. Why, then, in many churches, is the complaint still made that "The band is too loud"? For contemporary musician-leaders, is this a problem that is solved by simply adjusting their sound level? I don't think so. I believe that the volume level of the band is an example of one of the conflicting authenticities in contemporary worship and how it is handled depends on how well the competing authenticities are discerned.

The Worship Team is in the middle of a matrix of cultural discourses, many of which are cross-cultural. They have been given important ministry responsibility that the church sees as pivotal to their quest for cultural relevance (a term that in my experience is almost never unpacked and explored). In this role they are expected to be culture bearers as well as an embodied musical-cultural bridge between those outside and inside the church. Both the musicians and the church congregation have little or no awareness or preparation for the complexities inherent in these expectations and this becomes very evident when disagreements occur over Sunday worship musical practices.

As is the case of most pop musicians, the Worship Team members probably have little or no formal music training, except perhaps the keyboard player. However, they have acquired at least a working knowledge of popular music forms from MuchMusic, MTV, Country Music Television, radio, CD's and the many other forms of digital media. These contemporary musicians, many of whom are quite young, know how to effectively employ pop music artifacts – instruments, mics, amplifiers, lights etc. – and are fairly fluent in popular musical styles and performance practices, all of which have powerful symbolic significance within the culture at large. And they are required to use these discourses in varying degrees within a church service on a regular basis.

Older members of the Worship Team may have experiential familiarity with historic hymnody and the broad issues surrounding church music practice. However, if members are in their teens or early twenties, it is entirely possible that they know only the contemporary format of worship and believe that hymnals are old books best suited to adjusting the angle of the monitor speakers. The worship song repertoire used in a contemporary worship service is usually learned by the band by ear from highly produced CD's performed by stars of the world of Christian pop music. Some of these songs may be singable by a congregation, others not so. How to lead a congregation in worship singing is caught by imitating what has been experienced in worship services or inspired by commercial DVD's of major music worship gatherings and perhaps enhanced by attending workshops given at worship conferences. These helpful industry sponsored events usually include classes on how to be a more proficient instrumentalist and how to make the band sound better using the latest electronics. Many of these local musical leaders also experience live "worship concerts" put on by a professional worship band that comes to town promoting its newest songs for use in the local church.

All of this highlights the background typical of many worship leaders; they have their roots in the prevailing popular music culture mixed with contemporary Christian music ministry practices. It gives some weight to the admirable goal of authenticity within both the popular musical world as well that of the contemporary church. These worthy servants want to be the best musician-leaders of worship that they can be. However, given the cultural shaping of many of these contempory church musicians, it is easy to understand that they may be very focused on their role as "the band up front" and thus the voice of the singing congregation, an unknown phenomenon in the pop music world, may get overlooked. On Sunday, the worship team may appear to be performing, the chief clue being that they have not given sonic space for the congregation as the amplified singers and instrumentalists fill the room with their sound. But this is what popular music is supposed to do; create a complete and powerful soundscape. In so doing, the unamplified and unrehearsed congregation gets buried in the quest for a musical authenticity where congregational singing seems to be at best a secondary

consideration or in the case of the larger world of pop music, a foreign activity. From this perspective, just turning the volume down in favor of the congregation is not a credible solution because there is no credible problem. The band is so loud that the congregation is not heard and this the way it should be as the band grows as an authentic pop musical entity. Or, the band is balanced so that the congregation can be heard; this is leaning in the direction of authentic church music. It depends on which authenticity wins the competition.

Individual vs. Communal Worship

The new songs, commonly referred to as choruses or praise and worship songs are commended by some for their simple, accessible lyrics but criticized by others as shallow, banal and individualistic; there is a predominant use of "I" and "my" in the expressions of adoration. In fairness, the frequent use of the singular personal pronoun is not a new situation in evangelical hymnody as many revivalist songs of the 19th and early 20th century had much the same emphasis, celebrating a personal and individual experience of salvation. However, what is different today is that singing these choruses not only gives voice to personal feelings towards God but is driven by the desire on the part of the worshipper to experience a mode of being-in-song commonly referred to as "really worshipping." This is reported to be a sustained consciousness of only "me and God" or as one writer described it: "In a [contemporary] congregational worship service, each person is in their own 'phone booth with God,' engaged in a personal, isolated dialogue." (Baker-Wright, 2007, p. 173)

Mary, a twenty-something described "really worshipping:"

> Basically it's when you get to the point when you're communicating with God rather than just singing for singing. Part of it is the feeling of being emotionally invested in what you are singing and sometimes it's more cerebral than that; just kind of realizing that what you're singing is applying to yourself and to the way that you feel about God.

Julie said:

> I find that singing is the best way to start to worship – to draw me in and to start closing out all of the other distractions that are going on around.

When singing, many will close their eyes – the simple repetitive words of the songs allow for this. When I asked Sue, a college-age student, what was going on inside when she sang with eyes closed, she answered:

> I find that when I've got my eyes closed, it's a way for me to kind of tune out the people and all the distractions that are going on around me. I can focus much more on the words and just get to that stage of worship a lot more quickly.

It would appear that for many who experience contemporary congregational singing, to "really worship" is to come to the place where other worshippers are "tuned out" – an ironic use of words. The wonder of "us" before God, the multi-voiced local community that God has called into being seems to be perceived as merely providing a context for the individual to commune with God privately, but in a public setting. One

has to question what is special about communal singing as convocation, an experience of making music together.

Physical involvement with the songs beyond standing and singing is also common. In fact, this is one of the main reasons that the lyrics are projected and not in a book held by the singers; it allows maximum freedom for physical expression while singing. Gesturing with the hands is quite common; anything from open hand with palms upwards, to reaching, pointing, waving, or pounding the air can be seen in many worship gatherings. The degree of involvement will vary depending on the tradition of the church as well as the demographic of the congregation. As reported by Michelle, an older teen:

> In a youth group, I think people feel more comfortable because they are around their peers and they're all kind of at the same place; they don't feel like other people are so far above them. I don't know. There's a whole level of intimidation when you're worshipping with people of all different ages than when you're with just your peers, so I think that's when they're more comfortable completely worshipping God. And I've noticed in things like youth group, people will be more comfortable; they'll start crying and they'll be lifting their hands and people will feel comfortable kneeling, falling on their faces if they need to. But on a Sunday morning you won't see that because there's a difference when your parents can see you and when other adults in the church can see you. It's just different.

Steve, a sixteen year old told me:

> At church, there are a lot of older people – that's the majority – but there are also quite a few middle aged and younger people. Often [young] people don't feel free to express themselves because there aren't that many people that are the same as them and have the same tastes. So if they start jumping or something, or waving their hands in the air, they might get embarrassed when people start looking at them. But when you're at camp or something, most people are young people so that's when we can really get into it.

It is interesting to note that in my interviewing, all of the descriptions and definitions of worship offered were personal, not collective and yet almost all centered on communal singing in a religious gathering. To the young contemporary worship singer, "really worshipping" or "completely worshipping" God is conceived and enacted in terms of self-expression. It seems to be a celebration of the self and God, not the gathered community and God. The ideal is peer group worship singing because it offers a context that enables the highly prized values of freedom, comfort and security in which personally expressive or "authentic" worship is welcomed.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) succinctly describes this quest for personal authenticity:

> There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives me a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*. (p 28-29; italics in the original.)

He also warns us of the dangers of this approach to life.

> [O]ne of the common axes of criticism of the contemporary culture of authenticity is that it encourages a purely personal understanding of self-fulfillment, thus making the various associations and communities in which the person enters purely instrumental in their significance. (p. 43)
> The self-centered forms [of authenticity] are deviant…in two respects. They tend to centre fulfillment on the individual, making his or her affiliations purely instrumental; they push, in other words, to a social *atomism.* And they tend to see fulfillment as just of the self, neglecting or delegitimating the demands that come from beyond our own desires or aspirations, be they from history, tradition, society, nature, or God; they foster, in other words, a radical anthropocentrism. (p. 58; italics in the original.)

In seeking the experience of "me and God," the congregational context is instrumentalized for the benefit of the individual as others become "invisible." Ironically, the intimidation evoked by a multi-generational congregation affords a conscious experience of others, but for many contemporary worshippers, being seen by those who are "different" is a threat to the expression of the true self. This mixed age environment affords a sense of accountability but any adjusted individual behaviour seems to be motivated by not wanting to appear foolish rather than consideration of the sensibilities of others. Perhaps the need for adjustment is perceived as negative because personal expression is held by many as a highly valued "right." In this stance, the congregation becomes merely the backdrop for the central action of self-expression.

Theologian Richard Viladesau (2000) reminds us of the two-pronged nature of Christian love which further underscores the conflicting authenticities of the "contemporary" understanding of "really worshipping" and communal worship:

> The New Testament insistence that real love of God cannot exist without love of neighbour, redefines love in such a way that it surpasses mere *eros* toward God as the final Good... it sees human love for God not as a simple drive toward happiness, conceived as self-fulfillment, but as a sharing in the divine way of being, which is self-giving love that is universal in extension. This kind of love demands a certain de-centering of the self that even appears as "loss" of self, "death" to self, in the realization of a higher, more total good. (p. 53)

Trends?

I have written from the perspective of those who value unrehearsed communal song in church as an important act of worship. But we can no longer assume that congregational singing is uniformly valued or is a straightforward matter of singing our faith together. As practiced in "contemporary" worship, singing is not necessarily conceived as communal and is not the only participatory, physical activity associated with musical worship. And as I have tried to show, a volume imbalance between the Worship Team and the congregation is not necessarily resolved by simply adjusting the

volume control. I contend that a conflict of authenticities is encountered every Sunday as the culture of contemporary church music evolves and acts of worship are embodied.

Our highly individualistic culture has propelled us into a quest for personal authenticity, changing how we sing together. It has devalued the aggregate nature of the congregation, the glory of the group, the "convocation," the importance of the collective singing together as the Body of Christ. Many worshippers pursue the interior, personal, private space that is "me and God." And when they have arrived, perhaps singing out loud with others is an option, just as it is while singing with an iPod. Maybe for some, "holy moshing" is a more powerful act of worship than singing. Perhaps standing silently in the crowd, overwhelmed by the power of the live band and identifying with what they are singing is worship enough. Only God knows that the congregational voice is not silent but internal. And if the worshipper does sing out loud, perhaps it's ok that he is drowned out by the band – it is a safe and comfortable mode of being in an overwhelming sonic/aesthetic/spiritual experience before God. It may be that congregational singing as we have known it is no longer a premier event of a worship service but just one of many individualized options for how worshippers might respond to music in church. Whatever the future holds, there is no doubt that singing in Christian churches has been changed and will continue to change as cultural forces clash.

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