

What is driving Churches to a Passive Entertainment style of Worship?

Passive verses Active Worship

Is there a difference and why should it matter?

Worship is Worship

For the Evangelical and Reformed Church community

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Introduction

Within the Church community, when someone speaks of worship styles, they will often refer to one of these terms, Traditional, Contemporary, Blended, Liturgical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic. These terms are not exclusive, but they are an accurate description of how worship is conducted. When you look at congregational singing, all churches fall into one of two groups: Active Worship or Passive Worship. Active worship is defined as congregations that always have more than 50% of the people singing. Passive worship is when less than 50% of the people are singing all the time. In most churches, less than 30% of the congregation is singing all the songs. This single observation is the most common link that is driving many churches to turn to an entertainment style of worship. Let us look at why many churches are going in this direction.

Traditional Passive Worship

Under the Traditional, Contemporary, Blended, and Liturgical styles, there has always been a commitment to an active style of worship – meaning – where the congregation is expected and encouraged to sing. In some houses of worship, they sing acapella, while other churches will have a person conducting with the traditional piano and organ. Some will add a guitar and bass. While the focus is on the people actively singing, even if only 20% of the congregation is singing, it is accepted. For these churches, the musical instruments are downplayed, even though they unintentionally perform louder than the congregation. For these churches, the focus is on the Gospel message within most hymns and songs they sing. This leaves some people with the idea that worship is boring or lame. Some think that this style of worship is old, outdated, and needs to be modernized. For the churches that have tried to modernize, the level of active congregational singing has not changed, and the impact of attendance decline continues.

Contemporary Passive Worship

Under the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic worship styles, we should include churches that also use the word "contemporary" in defining their worship. For these churches, it doesn't seem to matter if the congregation is singing or not. The service, being conducted by a music team or band, will have the sound levels of their performance dominating everything. The worship leader will choreograph songs and some Bible verses to get more people in the mood to sing. Words are projected onto a screen where some people just mouth the lyrics. Others attempt to sing loud enough to try to hear themselves and hope they are making a joyful noise. Regardless of how much effort is made to get the congregation singing, less than 30% of the people are actively singing.

Some Evangelical and Pentecostal churches fall under a conservative style of worship. What makes these churches conservative is because everything is focused on the coming sermon. For these churches, it can take up to 45 minutes to get to the sermon. Between prayers, announcements, scripture reading, someone making a presentation in song or words, and 3 to 5 songs that take up 20 minutes for their worship, the emphasis is on Jesus, the Gospel, or a lesson the congregation needs to learn. Attendance in these churches is often directly linked to the preaching skill of the pastor, regardless of if they are conservative in their messages or not.

The New Age of Passive Worship

Churches that have heavily invested in technology and worship teams, come under two groups. They are either part of the conservatively lead churches, where the sermon is the main event of the worship experience, or they are the hyper evangelicals where the music portion of the worship service is 30-90 minutes long. Often the music is as long as or longer than the sermon.

For a growing number of churches, there has been a dynamic shift in worship styles. The transition is a style of worship where the visual experience is synchronized to music. Where lighting, video, and moving images are synchronized to amplified music. Churches are adding motorized lights that can change colors and video walls to create an atmosphere ripe to deliberately stimulate the senses. In this environment, the song leading is crafted to guide people into a manufactured energetic form of worship. Even if people are not singing, at least some are swaying to the music, and others are raising their hands. For such churches, the music has become the event, not the teaching of the Gospel. Furthermore, in such churches, the Gospel is hardly part of the message.

Rather, it is a message that is mostly about what God can do for me and a strong focus on how I can become a better person. These messages promote programs and steps that if you follow them, you will have a better life. The teaching is, if you tithe, you serve at the food bank and help people more, you will become a better person. Asking God into your heart with a promise to do better is a ministry of works, not salvation. James 1:19-27 clearly explains how we are to Love God first. Then we are to follow His laws (notice that it doesn't say to obey them). We are to be doers of the word. Because we love God, we do what the Bible teaches. Sadly, many ministers teach it the other way around. Their message is, do the work for a spiritual experience to make you feel better about yourself. If you feel better, you are saved!

There is nothing more deadly than a carefully crafted message of false hope and a message for a better life by doing things that include something holy, sacred, spiritual, and secret, and never knowing what true salvation is. These are people who have never experienced being transformed by the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised everyone who accepts Him as Lord, who is our sin sacrifice, and a new life as a born-again Christian. When you accepted Jesus as Lord, did you change? Have you ever returned to your old life, your old ways, and enjoyed it, or did you ask God to forgive you and told yourself never to do that again? A person who is Born again will have the Holy Spirit helping you stay on the narrow path. A person who thinks they are Born Again and continues a life of sinning without a second thought may not be saved at all. This is the trap of false teaching and teachers. The addictive entertainment style of feel-good music and messages is crafted to create a manufactured artificial spiritual experience found nowhere in the Bible. Anyone promising a better life by following a recipe outside of the teaching of the scriptures is a wolf. That includes teaching where scriptures are taken out of context to say whatever message the composer wants.

Passive Worship is turning into Secular Style Entertainment

How are so many ministers getting away with preaching such a distorted message? Mostly through entertainment. Have you ever been to a healing service? How long was the music program? Thirty to ninety minutes long? During that time, you are hearing promises and testimonies that raise everyone's hope up high into a feverish pitch. They shout out repeatedly, "Your faith will set you free!" followed by, "You pray, and God will give you whatever you want!" Where in the Bible does it say that God serves us? Rather, we choose to serve God because He protects us from going to Hell when we love Him. When people get stimulated enough, the focus on true Biblical teaching gets diverted with shrewd speech. The message is focused on the "new golden calf," on the promise of miraculous healing on demand. Here is when the blinded follower will do almost anything to get what the fake healers are promising or selling. It is common that during such an event, the collection plate is passed around more than once, and the first time is before the healing service begins. The second or third time is during the healings and then at the end of the service/show. They talk you into continuous tithing for a

miracle, but, they are diminishing your faith down to nothing more than a "faith healers' lottery game." Faith and salvation are not a game you can bargain with.

The Elephant in The Room

This carnival-like atmosphere over time has moved from healing services into an entire worship program that gets people engaged into the most important person in their lives – self. This artificial entertainment style of worship has progressed into an alternative to confronting the elephant in the room, "room acoustics." Room acoustics controls how many people will actively sing during congregational singing. Who wants to sing in a room where you can't hear yourself, nor the person next to you, no matter how much you try to engage? The room makes you feel alone. Sure, there are many times in almost every church where more than 50% of a congregation will sing a very familiar song, especially to celebrate an event. Such singing happens only a few times a year. For most churches out there, regardless of size or attendance, only 15% to 35% of the people sing 95% of the time. With such low participation, no matter how good the song leader and worship team is, getting people to engage in the worship singing becomes an effort of futility. Out of desperation, people will do whatever will work.

The church is not built on Programs

Many churches have chosen an entertainment style of worship to draw more people into the flock. With enough technology, anyone with modest musical talent can create an energetic rock concert-like atmosphere to get people to be passively engaged, if not actively engaged. The difference is, people can be stimulated with sight and sound to trigger the senses to release those feel-good drugs the body naturally creates called dopamine and endorphins. How often have you started tapping a hand or foot when you heard a familiar feel-good song? How do you feel if several of those songs are played back-to-back, and then the music changes or stops? How do you feel after that? You want more.

Music can be used to trigger the body to crave more. If the music stops, you had better have a good message to follow up, and what better message than one that can keep the dopamine and endorphins flowing by focusing a message on self. And what comes before the sermon and after the music? Most churches pass the collection plate—what better time to get people to give than when they are all pumped up. There are church leaders and pastors who have been trained in the art of knowing how to carefully manipulate people with music and feel-good messages. They will hire professional musicians who have had some success in the concert music world to craft the beginning of a church service to hyper-stimulate people to get them addicted to participating in passive worship. People are so pumped up, not realizing that even though they are surrounded by many people and enjoying this passive form of worshipping, deep down, many have this subtle and distressing feeling that they are still all alone. The common thread in all these churches is acoustics. The people are in a room that cannot support congregational singing. Everyone wants to sing but they give up because of how the room makes them feel. Before worship starts in some churches, the young people are encouraged to put their hands up and sway to the music as they scatter throughout the audience. When people see the youth doing this, it looks so spiritual. That is when peer pressured sets in and more of the audience joins in to make the appearance they are actively worshipping. Watch any YouTube video where people are raising their hands in worship and it will be the youth, spread throughout the audience, raising their hands up first. How artificial is that!

Active Christian Worship

However, that is different than being in a worship space where the acoustics are so good; over 50-80% of the congregation sings without being self-conscious. They are singing with complete freedom to express themselves as a coral of congregational singers expressing themselves, often with four-part harmonies. This is what active worship is like all the time. When the acoustics of a church is good, it is easy to have enough people engaged in singing to the extent that there is no need for an entertainment style of worship to lead the congregation. When the worship space properly supports congregational singing, people will also sway and raise their hands for many of the traditional and modern hymns. The people will do this spontaneously because they are free to comfortably show their love for God. They don't do this to make themselves feel good, but it does feel good when you truly want to show Him your love in song. This is not about getting rid of worship teams, but where the job of the worship leading is reversed. Where the worship team follows the congregational singing in a support role rather than leading and overpowering anyone who is singing, even if their joyful sound is just a whisper. This is different than when music is used to manipulate the audience into hyper stimulation and feeling better about themselves.

History on the Order of Worship

Another item that will be seen as controversial is the notion that music should follow the reading of scriptures and the teaching rather than before the sermon. The Gospel message, when properly taught, is never a feel-good message, but rather, it is supposed to be about reinforcing our love for God as a community. The message is about keeping the believers on the straight and narrow path. It is about following God because we love Him, as He has always loved us. It is about following His laws to be safe. When Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount, He didn't end the lesson as a feel-good message. When Jesus finished preaching from a boat in Matthew 13, that message also ended as a warning. In preaching the Gospel properly, the end of most sermons will either be a warning or a lesson in how to be a follower of Christ. There will be teaching on sin, repentance, and change. There are no feel-good messages in the Gospel.

And when should the scriptures be read? Through Jesus's own example in Luke 4:16 *"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read."* In most cases whenever the Pharisees or scribes confronted Jesus, He would answer with a scripture verse first, then a rebuke or teaching.

Here is the dilemma, people get emotionally hyped with feel-good music at the beginning of the worship services, only to be brought down to earth by the end of the sermon. The pastor closes with a 1- or 2-minute prayer. Then out of consideration or desperation, the closing song is for blessing or to brighten things up. There is no time for reflection or meditation on what you just learned. If anything, the song is more of a distraction than comfort. It's no wonder people hardly remember what the sermon was 10 minutes after worship. The reality is, you need several songs to lift people, but with everyone already investing over an hour into the worship service, most people are not in the mood to be comforted by three to five more hymns or songs again.

Worship service should begin with the reading of a complete scripture passage of the Bible by an elder or someone who has rehearsed the passage, or a person is talented at reading out loud to an audience, The passage or passages should reflect what the sermon will be about. Next is the sermon; after that is a time of prayer to reflect on the sermon, and engage the congregation further, a short Q&A lasting 5 to 10 minutes to secure the understanding the minister taught everyone, then announcements. Finally, 3 to 5 songs to lift people

up as a group where their unison of singing strengthens them in the message they just heard, regardless of how hard or direct the teaching was. Biblical singing is about celebration with God and His teaching. The Sheep will flock to a full Gospel message while the goats will run. If you read about church history, it wasn't until the 1820s where worship music moved from the end of church service to the beginning. This was done deliberately to get people excited for the following feel-good message. Yes, even 200 years ago, getting a congregation to have more than 50% of the audience singing was a struggle and if you look at church history further back, congregational singing has always been an issue.

Bound in a False Spiritual Trap

Sure, there are some charismatic ministers who can start off with a feel-good message without music to get things started, but the reality is, without the music, people are not going to stay for an hour for a feel-good message unless you are a guru at motivational speaking. People who participate in extended music programs become hyper-stimulated. They become malleable in teaching them whatever message you want to brainwash the followers into- whatever cult or false teaching you want to bind them to. The hidden message here is to divide and conquer. Fill the building with goats, call it church and watch the sheep scatter. Making the sheep feel like they are failures.

Having people worshiping in a room where the acoustics cannot support authentic congregational singing, and by having an entertainment style of worship, you can keep people trapped into being happy and feeling alone at the same time. The false hope is that if you keep going to the church, the feeling of loneliness during worship is replaced with "works" by helping with random feeding programs, community projects, staging drama and music concerts, small groups programs, volunteering, tithing, and hoping for a holy or spiritual experience. The entertainment style of worship draws in people with good hearing, which is mostly younger people. Older people are excluded, and without elders, the person leading the church can get away with preaching whatever they want. There is nothing more contentious than a church full of young people without older people who will demand accountability when the leadership becomes questionable. For an entertainment style of worship, where lighting, video walls, online TV video cameras, a huge sound system, paid musicians, and drama performances are as good as shows people would see in Las Vegas, acoustics doesn't matter. The whole program is set up to entrap people, take their money in an artificial religious experience where people come and go like a revolving door. None of this is from the Bible, but the Bible is hyphenated to create a false message, blinded by the heavy use of technology. Sadly, those who leave such a church often want nothing to do with Christianity again. This cycle of keeping people from the message of salvation must end.

The Bible is the Source for Meaningful Church Growth

Room acoustics that supports congregational singing does not need any gimmicks. It quickly becomes apparent as good worship spaces become distinguished between being drawn into a ministry of salvation and loving God, or an organization of false teaching and false hope. The Bible is the source of everything we know about God. The Bible is also the source for knowledge about church acoustics if you know where to look for it and how it applies to modern church buildings. Did you know that 95% of all existing church buildings cannot support active worship? This is why the whole church community is struggling. The churches that are trying their best to stay on the straight and narrow path Jesus taught are losing to churches that are filling buildings void of the message of salvation. Entertainment is the new gospel, whether it be a seeker sensitive, purpose-driven, or a self-help preaching message. Church acoustics that cannot support the kind of congregational

singing that can unite people is the single common thread all of these church buildings share and it leaves the church vulnerable to false teaching and teachers.

The good news is that the Bible has a universal plan that can fix the acoustics of any existing church from passive to active congregational singing and maximize speech clarity at the same time. If you start looking in the Bible for answers to these two acoustical problems, there you will find who designed such a system – Jesus – the author and finisher (John 1:3, 1 Chronicles 28:19, Hebrews 12:2). Bad acoustics allow false teaching and teachers to hide in plain sight within the walls of a building where worship service looks more like worshipping a false god – the minister who is playing the audience like the Pied Piper.

Other clues of false teaching are: Are you encouraged to bring a physical Bible to worship services? Are most of the song's choruses? Are some of the choruses repeated more than three times? Do the verses of the songs have true Biblical teaching or are they about making you feel better? Are the song leaders swaying to the music back and forth with their eyes closed, looking like they are in a trance? Are all the texts the minister uses conveniently posted on a large screen, so you don't have to look them up? Does the minister read full passages of what they are teaching, or are they just quoting fragments of the scriptures, hoping no one will read their Bibles? Does the sermon begin with reading a complete passage of scriptures, and start teaching from what was read, or does the speech begin with a story – often with the minister involved? (*2 Timothy 4:2-4, preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*) For those who follow such teachers, things don't end well.

Seriously, Acoustics can help fix the Church!

A church with good acoustics that can support proper congregational singing, in most cases, can expose the sheep from the goats and those wolves in sheep's clothing sitting next to the sheep. There are many people giving up on the church, as attendance seems to be declining. Fixing the acoustics of a church for better congregational singing is one way to fight back dwindling attendance that doesn't involve innovative outreach programs or turning to an entertainment style of worship. If anything, it helps the minister to feed the Lord's sheep and to fulfill the promise; when Jesus said in John 10:25-29, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Church acoustics is a tool, much like hymnals, Bibles, pianos, organs, choirs, and sound systems. Good acoustics can't fix the health of a congregation, but a better worship space will expose false teachings and make the preaching of the Gospel easier. Some churches are not prepared to see the congregation separate as in the sheep from the goats, for once the goats leave, where will the sheep come from? Have faith that the Gospel message will bring the sheep back, and before long, the flock will grow with new sheep. That is the true work of the Holy Spirit.

For the Record

From the firsthand experiences of many churches that have already upgraded their acoustics, the change begins with a healthier fellowship through congregational singing. Active singing during worship can be the difference

between following Christ and hearing the preaching of the whole Gospel message and worshiping in a place that divides the church community by not addressing the elephant in the room. This may sound like a stretch, but after seeing hundreds of church buildings transformed, and observing with following-up visits how acoustics directly contributes to a growing congregation, the impact is unmistakable. If there is any good news here, it is a fact that in following the Bible for true acoustical change, any church can afford it, regardless of the size of the sanctuary. The secular community can't make that claim ever.

For those of you who have read this far and know that your church building doesn't support active congregational singing, have some faith. In Mat 17:19-20, "Then the disciples came to Jesus apart, and said, why could we not cast him (the demon) out? And Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief. For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Move from here to there. And it shall move. And nothing shall be impossible to you.'" You can make a difference by letting those in leadership know that there is a Biblical way to bring real Christian worship back into the Church and start by attracting those distracted and wandering sheep who know His Voice back into the flock. Then, have faith that Gospel message will do the rest. What happens after that is all about leadership and who is the head of your church.

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