Why We Worship the Way We Do
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As the pastor of a church that offers a blended worship, I have observed that worship can be an emotional subject—we take it personally, and we have deep ties to certain elements and ways of worshipping.

Some get tears in their eyes when they sing *The Old Rugged Cross*—others rejoice with a song like *God of Wonders*. Some like the dignified pace of a responsive call to worship—others crave an invitation to silence. Some believe that the most appropriate way to worship is quietly in a pew. Others feel that they can only worship standing on their feet and clapping.

It’s very interesting to see what people hold on to as their non-negotiable in worship. For some it’s the style of music or prayers or preaching. For others it’s about seeing lay leaders up front or having children and youth involved.

My observation is that a key to community is making room for each other during worship. That’s why this church has 3 different styles of worship. The point is that we are all worshipping God regardless of style. Of course, it’s hard to get away from being picky in worship. It’s something that we all do. But rather than being picky I’d like to encourage us to be passionate.

Sally Morgenthaler in her book *Worship Evangelism* writes:

Worship is the most powerful tool for satisfying the hunger of famished, injured souls, for breaking down spiritual strongholds of pride and unbelief, and for ushering in the gift of true joy.

But how can we have meaningful worship and make room for each other? My theory is that our learning style gives us a clue to our worship style. Educators have discovered that people learn in three different ways: audio, visual, and kinesthetic/tactile. Each of these styles addresses how we receive and give information.

Audio learners have the easiest time with the way worship has been conducted through the years, because the Church has mainly focused on hearing the word of God. If you’ve been in a church with there are no stained glass windows, no banners, no pictures—just white walls and a cross up front then you know that the worship style they stress the most is audio—listening. Often audio worshipers will close their eyes to really hear what is being said.

Visual worshippers appreciate stories in sermons. It gives them a chance to see what is being said. When I was little I could always tell when the preacher was going to tell a story. There was something in his voice that made me stop whatever I was doing in worship, and listen. After the story, his voice would go out of story mode and I would go back to coloring.
Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church also has beautiful banners and stained glass that helps our visual worshippers focus on God.

*Kinesthetic/tactile* people move in order to learn. In worship they will be the ones who enjoy standing while they sing—they enjoy clapping, not only during songs but in other aspects of worship. They will lift up their hands in praise. To worship for kinesthetic/tactile people is to do so with their whole selves—body, mind and spirit.

Let me put it this way...how many different ways are there to eat an Oreo? Some of us simply start eating it, nibbling at it as if we had all the time in the world. Some of us will twist it apart and lick the filling out first. Some of us will get a glass of milk and dunk the Oreo until it’s almost ready to fall apart, and eat the whole thing in one bite! Does it really matter how we eat the Oreo? In the end, the Oreo is still being eaten!

I have found it helpful to understand how our learning styles influence our worship. Remembering this has often freed me from the delusion that worship is about me and my desires. Am I focused on those around me, or am I focused on getting to know God?

Deeply immersed in meditation during a church service, Italian poet Dante failed to kneel at the appropriate moment. His enemies hurried to the bishop and demanded that Dante be punished for his sacrilege. Dante defended himself by saying, "If those who accuse me had had their eyes and minds on God, as I had, they too would have failed to notice events around them, and they most certainly would not have noticed what I was doing."

It’s not about us—it’s always about God. I’ve often heard people say—well, I didn’t get anything out of that service. But that assumes that we are the audience and God is the performer. It’s so easy to have this attitude because we go to the movies, or to a play, or a concert where it is true that we are the audience. But worship is different. We are the performers—the worship leaders are the prompters—and God is the audience. So the question isn’t did you get anything out of worship-- the question is did God get anything out of worship?

There was once a great pianist who was giving a concert in a large concert hall. When he finished the concert, everyone in the place stood up and gave him a standing ovation—except for an old man in the front row who didn’t stand, even though everyone else was on their feet cheering. When the pianist walked off the stage, he was crying. His manager asked him what was wrong and he said, “Didn’t you see the man in the first row that wasn’t standing and wasn’t applauding?” The manager said, “Sure, I saw him. But he was the only person who wasn’t standing and cheering. Why worry about the old man?” Then the pianist said, “But you don’t understand. That man was the composer of the music I played tonight. He is the only one who counts. He is the only one who knows what the piece is supposed to sound like.”

In other words, it doesn’t really matter what style of worship we are using—formal, informal, traditional, contemporary or blended—but it does matter where our focus is. Are we connecting with God, and allowing others that luxury too? So the next time there is something in worship that is not meaningful to you and pulls your attention away from God, know that it is meaningful to someone else and they are connecting.

We are here to get to know God and we do that through worship. We are here not to be picky but to be passionate. In his play, *Equus*, Peter Shaffer has one of the characters say, "Without worship, you shrink; it's as brutal as that." And so we seek the very presence of
God—we look for signs of Christ's power—we yearn for God to help us make sense out of life--for Christ to be present to us as we live through all of what makes life so unmistakably life.