

FOUR WORSHIP CULTURES:

A brief overview of the Latino, African American, Asian American and Caucasian North American worship traditions

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LATINO WORSHIP:

A communal celebration of the presence of God and the Holy Spirit

THE ROLE OF THE WORSHIP LEADER IN LATINO WORSHIP STYLE

The role of the worship leader is to help create and lead a communal experience of worshipping God. The worship leader will call out to the congregation and invite a response, whether in singing or shouting praise. The leader will be interacting with both the congregation and with other members on the worship team. For example, the leader may say to the congregation, "tell the person next to you that God is here."

There are usually many other singers on stage, all of which are involved with each other, looking at each other and singing expressly to the congregation to help create a communal experience. The leader and the team are the main focal point in leading the congregation through the songs.

There are rarely overheads to present the words, instead you need to listen to the leader's voice. The eyes of the worship leader are open while singing in order to interact with the congregation. They are expected to be a passionate model of worship. They need to lead with a lot of energy and excitement and be comfortable to speak to the congregation with direction. The worship leader speaks with authority, giving instructions to the whole congregation and also invites the people to "unload" in God's presence.

DISTINCT MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND THE USE OF TIME IN WORSHIP

In Mexican congregations there will be a horn section, guitars and many percussion instruments. In Puerto Rican congregations there will be many singers up front. In all Latin music auxiliary percussion, tambourines, congas and the drum set are essential instruments. Singers are usually women, and they sing in unison. There is not as much emphasis placed on vocal harmony, so for example all 9 women up front could be singing in unison.

Songs are often taught in the call and response style since there are rarely overheads to look at. There is a lot of repetition of each part within the song and the direction of the song can be manipulated wherever the leader wants it to go. If the songs are in Spanish, it is dishonoring to the congregation to mispronounce the words since you are singing in many people's native tongue.

The younger generation is beginning to introduce the Latin rhythms into their worship songs. There is great controversy within the generations of the church over what music is appropriate to worship to. Older generations see Latin music as a reminder of the "womanizing bar scenes" and prefer to sing Western hymns and "white" praise songs as a sign of their break from the worldly ways. Younger generations are attracted to praise songs that sound like the music they listen to everyday and prefer to worship God in their familiar musical culture.

The volume level of worship is sustained at a constant high level within the worship in the Latino style. Celebrative worship gives permission for people to shout, sing loudly, and express themselves boldly. When worship becomes more meditative, there is still a loud "hovering" sound in the background of people speaking out

loud, crying, praying with others. This will happen within a song, where the singers stop and the band continues to play a section over and over. Worship seldom becomes quiet or completely silent.



Similar to Asian and Black churches, the worship experience in Latino churches is not defined by one song, but by the experience of many songs together. Worship is not declared done by the clock, but by the congregation's experience with the Holy Spirit. Because it is a communal experience only when the entire congregation has met with the Lord is the service is over. The individual's own time needs or process is subordinate to the group.

IMPORTANT THEMES AND EMPHASIZED CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD IN LATINO WORSHIP

Celebration of God's goodness is a very important theme in the Latino worship style. Joy in the Lord is often emphasized in the worship services. The community experience is also present in worship songs, and felt as they are sung. Often songs about the Holy Spirit, God's spirit falling and the Kingdom of God, His power, authority and reign in this world are frequently sung about and praised.

OVERALL ATMOSPHERE IN THE LATINO WORSHIP SETTING

An energetic experience of community in God's presence is the overall feeling of a worshipper in a Latino church. It's loud, bold, and emotionally intense. There is an expectation of a deep emotional connection to God. The congregation does not see crying in worship as out of the ordinary, or cause for concern. There is often space within the worship time to wait on the Lord, unloading your burdens and giving over your pain. Prayer times in worship are very powerful. There is permission for people to have outward (and audible) expressions of deep emotion during the worship service.

Another element of the overall atmosphere is the use of visual arts to communicate emotion and the values of the community. "If you want to know what is important to the community, look at the murals around the neighborhood."

AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORSHIP:

An experience of freedom and celebration of God's power

THE ROLE OF THE WORSHIP LEADER

The worship leader in the Gospel style is a passionate leader who exhorts the congregation to worship God with their whole being. Often described as being "anointed by God" to take spiritual authority, they direct the congregation to worship as they feel the Holy Spirit leading them. They create energy and momentum in the group, the "hype-person."

Seen as God's instrument by the congregation, they are able to give commands like "raise your hands, get on your feet" and the congregation responds appropriately. The worship leader is also a storyteller and gives his own testimony frequently. While songs are being sung, the leader will sing over top, ad-libbing words to help the congregation get into worship and also have a deep emotional experience.

The worship leader is the one who determines the direction and length of the song, and often leads the transitions in-between songs. They will lead with their eyes open in songs that are celebrative and community-oriented, and with their eyes closed in more meditative songs. Rarely do worship leaders play an instrument and sing at the same time.

DISTINCT MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND THE USE OF TIME IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORSHIP

Repetition is the most common musical element in African-American worship. The song in its entirety will be repeated a lot, as well as each section of the song can be broken down and repeated exclusively. Often songs are led to musically grow into a climax, and they often stay at a climactic point (being very loud, allowing for bold emotional expressions like crying, screaming, etc.) for a while and then come back down to where the song began. The reason for the repetition is to give the "whole person" a chance to respond to the truth of the words. Repetition allows for the Holy Spirit to speak a personal word to each individual, and then more repetition allows the individual to respond with their mind and emotions.

The worship band is usually large, drum set, bass, a few keyboards, electric guitar, brass section, a choir of singers and a few lead singers. The musical goal in the songs is to achieve a "tight" sound, where everyone is playing together and the sound is polished. Doing things together like choral swells, or unison melodic riffs in the band create that tight sound. Working towards musical excellence is considered

the way that the band members give glory to God. Therefore, instrumental solos or complicated musical riffs are frequently heard to allow people to worship God by recognizing the talent He has given to the player. Most often the instrumentalists only play their parts and the singers only sing. Since the arrangements are often very complex, only doing one task enables everyone to focus on doing that one thing well. Many new songs are the same ones written by white composers and the church has changed the harmonies to create an “urban sound” to them. For example, the song There is none like you.

The involvement of the congregation is an important musical element to the style. Many people in the congregation will bring their own tambourine and play along with their own rhythms. Singers will sing in harmony or sing their own testimonies over top to the song. Often space will be created at the end of a song in order for the congregation to create their own musical response to God. In general, the congregation is not expected to respond uniformly. It is a communal experience that is enriched by everyone’s individual expressions. They feel free to sing, clap, dance, sing harmony, and respond to the Holy Spirit however they wish.

A note on cross-cultural participation: It is important to correctly pronounce the words the way the congregation and leader are singing them. Since the same words are often pronounced differently by white and black folks, white folks need to listen carefully if they want to participate in the song the way their black brothers and sisters are singing it.



The common worship experience of an African-American church is an all-day affair, filled with singing, preaching, praying, fellowship and eating. As with Asian and Latino churches, “Having church” happens only when a song or group of songs have sufficiently allowed for an emotional interchange between you and the Holy Spirit. Since this cannot be planned, space must be created to allow for the spontaneous response to the working of the Spirit. Sometimes singing can be relatively contained to the way the band planned the song, sometimes the song is extended for 15 minutes in order to allow the Spirit to move as it wishes. There is often music behind prayer and different chords and sounds can evoke different emotions. There is music to prepare the congregation to enter into spiritual battle, music to reflect on God’s goodness, music to move the congregation to celebrate

God's character. Very rarely is there long periods of quiet or silence in the worship setting. Music is the string that connects all the elements of the service together.

IMPORTANT THEMES AND EMPHASIZED CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORSHIP

God's power and His promises are a deep source of joy and celebration in African-American worship services. Often there is a lot of remembering God's faithfulness to His people over history. There is a lot of time given to celebrating the freedom that God will bring to the oppressed and His promise of liberty, justice and abundant provision. There is great exuberance in worship because God is Supreme over all and He is the redeemer of all pain.

OVERALL ATMOSPHERE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORSHIP

The overall atmosphere in African-American worship is a celebration of freedom in God as a Holy community. Because the people are filled with hope and joy that God is powerful, the whole community celebrates with everything they have. This often also includes wearing your best clothes to church as a sign of reverence and celebration. It's usually loud and the room is filled with excitement, (sometimes appearing to be chaotic because of people's freedom in the spirit). There is an expectation that the whole person will meet with God deeply and have an emotional experience in His presence through the worship time.

ASIAN AMERICAN WORSHIP:

An experience of devotion and intimacy with God

THE ROLE OF THE WORSHIP LEADER

The worship leader in Asian American worship reflects Asian cultural values of humility and indirect communication. The worship leader leads by being an authentic lead worshipper and using the non-verbal cues of musical dynamics. Therefore, they are focused more on their own worship experience, relying on their model to give space for others to worship. The worship leader will take whatever posture they feel is authentic and often worship with their eyes closed.

The experience of worshipping God is what is at the forefront, therefore the worship leader takes a back seat in order for people to focus on God. In order to create safety and freedom, the leader will model what is appropriate rather than

talk and explain. If they do speak, it is often either a prayer or an invitation to the congregation to move deeper into communion with the Holy Spirit.

Too much speaking could be interpreted as being manipulative to the individual experience of the worshiper, or a sign that the worship leader is not fully worshipping herself. The instrument (usually guitar or keyboard) gives the leading cues, not necessarily the leader's voice. Unfortunately, there is also a lot of pressure placed upon the worship leader to be an excellent representative of the Asian American community.

DISTINCT MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND THE USE OF TIME

The experience of worship in the Asian American style is defined by a set of songs, not just one song. There needs to be enough time for musical worship to build in intensity and create intimacy. The first song is just a "warm-up" and there is rarely talking in-between songs in order to build and sustain emotional intensity.

Musical dynamics subtly communicate to the congregation the direction of the song. This is why most often the worship leader is playing an instrument while singing. They "speak" through the instrument, giving directions to the band and the congregation. Musical dynamics are very important, though quieter. The soft, more intimate times are very quiet, usually led by one vocalist and a single instrument, while the loud times are not as spontaneous or exuberant as other musical styles.

Musical excellence is a high priority and is seen as giving glory to God. Excellence is the goal of the band together, not the individual players. Instrumentalists don't want to attract too much attention to themselves by playing complicated solos because that would detract attention from worshipping God. Songs from Vineyard, Hillsong United, Worship Together and Passion writers are most frequently sung and loved in Asian American churches. Often the song's order is manipulated and the song can be extended by instrumental space within the structure of the song. Another common musical tag is to end the song by slowing the tempo considerably and repeating the chorus out of tempo. This allows for one last opportunity to reflect on the content of the song.

IMPORTANT THEMES AND EMPHASIZED CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD IN ASIAN AMERICAN WORSHIP SERVICES

Asian American cultural values obviously influence the attributes of God most focused upon. Sacrifice and servanthood are ultimate cultural expressions of love,

and consequently many songs focus upon our total service and devotion in response to God's sacrifice of His Son. Singing words of extreme sacrifice and commitment aren't false to Asian Americans who consistently feel that they aren't able to fulfill expectations.

For Korean Americans in particular, the concept of "han" – of great suffering and despair – easily finds its way into the language of sacrifice, suffering and devotion found in Christian circles. God's holiness and our utter depravity make God's unconditional acceptance tremendously healing, particularly when Asian Americans often do not find expressive love from their own parents. Our repentance in light of His holiness and transcendence is often present in services. The mystery and transcendence of God, His glory and Holiness inspire deep awe and reverence in worship services. Also there is often a long section of songs which draw people into an intimate relationship with Jesus. God as a close and tender Father is often a healing characteristic for Asian American worshippers.

OVERALL ATMOSPHERE IN ASIAN AMERICAN WORSHIP SETTING

The overall atmosphere of worship in an Asian American style is intimate and the focus is seemingly on the individual experience. It is true that there is an individualistic component to Asian American worship. This feels counter-intuitive, particularly because of the high value on community in Asian American circles. But, worship provides an atmosphere to finally escape the expectations of community and "face saving," and gives an opportunity to seek individual expression and freedom. Yet at the same time, one would feel very uncomfortable being the *only one* fully engaged in worship. Unless you were the worship leader, one would feel very uncomfortable being the odd one out, egging others on in worship.

The sense that we are connected in worship never truly leaves an Asian American. The lights are dim in order to create safety and intimacy. There is emotional intensity that is not necessarily outwardly expressed as intensely as it is felt.

CAUCASIAN NORTH AMERICAN WORSHIP

THE ROLE OF THE WORSHIP LEADER

The worship leader in North American Caucasian worship style is often seen as the teacher and guide to the Throne Room of God. The leader will teach the congregation about who God is and how we should appropriately respond to Him. Often the leader will offer an explanation before the songs, giving the congregation

an understanding of what is ahead and why we are singing the song. Since there is much in white culture that wants to succeed by doing things the correct way, congregations look towards the worship leader for direction in responding to God correctly.

Often the leader will speak permission to the congregation to respond in a variety of ways with their bodies. Many congregations do not feel free to respond differently than the group and will not act independently unless given permission by the worship leader. However once the leader has said, "if you feel like standing before God, you may do so" then often people will choose to stand even though the majority may remain seated. Perhaps the desire to worship correctly is one of the reasons why so many Caucasian people feel safe and free in a traditional liturgical worship style.

The worship leader also creates momentum for the congregation to worship, but it is much more reserved than in the African-American church. The majority of churches view God with a western mind set believing that certain things are either sacred or secular, and only a certain level of excitement or emotion is often appropriate in church. The worship leader gives instruction as to what expressions are appropriate in their particular church culture. The worship leader often plays an instrument (most likely acoustic guitar or keyboard) and sings as well.

DISTINCT MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND THE USE OF TIME

Following the theme of worshipping "correctly", contemporary songs are often done in a similar way every time. This helps everyone in the congregation feel comfortable to worship because there aren't any surprises to figure out how to sing correctly. There may be some repetition involved, but it is usually planned out by the band ahead of time, and almost never changes the general order of the song. Often the chorus will be repeated and the last line of the song repeated as an ending tag. In order for everyone to sing the right words together, there is almost always a hymnal, chorus book or PowerPoint projection of the words.

Musical contributions from the congregation are often limited. Often the congregation is holding the printed words and so they don't have hands free to clap. When they do clap, it is often on every beat, or 1 and 3 beats. There is often songs with "fancy" clapping parts in sections which are done the same way every time. Depending on the area of North America you live in, the following

contemporary publishers would be focused upon: Vineyard, Passion, Worship Together, Integrity, Maranatha and Hillsong United.

In general, much of the upbeat music has a similar feel to rock, which feels like every beat is emphasized. This is why many students jump up and down to the music. Songs can end in silence. The range in volume is comparable to Asian American worship, and not as loud as Latino or African-American.

IMPORTANT THEMES AND EMPHASIZED CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD

A personal relationship with God is often sung about, calling God our friend, our Father, etc. The cross as God's sacrifice for us, our response of repentance and personal piety and forgiveness are also common themes. Nature and Creation are commonly reasons to give praise. God's mercy and His desire for our holiness are often themes of slow reflective songs.

OVERALL ATMOSPHERE IN CAUCASIAN NORTH AMERICAN WORSHIP

There is often a lot of symbolism in Caucasian churches: the cross, altar, candles and visual art. The overall experience is focused on helping the individual connect with the Triune God.