

If #OscarsSoWhite, Is #WorshipSoMusic?

The world loves a good controversy. The latest in a long line of hashtag controversies is the #OscarsSoWhite debacle. While I am not qualified to weigh in on that particular conversation, it does bring to mind another controversy that I am qualified to speak about.

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The language we use in any particular setting can be critical, especially when you are leading a group of people. There is a saying: **Don't communicate with the goal of being understood. Communicate in a way that makes it impossible to be misunderstood.** In light of that, think about the terms we use in our modern "church" vernacular.

Worship Leader. Worship Service. Worship Album. (Insert favorite music artist here.) Worship Concert. Worship Industry. Worship Conference.

Interesting, isn't it? If I were trying to communicate in a way in which it was impossible to misunderstand me, then I should be clearer. Are we, as leaders in the church, saying the only way to worship God is to sing Him a song? Absolutely not! But our language betrays the culture and industry we have created around music as the primary tool for worship within Christendom. Somehow we have co-opted the word worship to mean music. Granted, it is music with a particular focus on Jesus or singing about religious themes, but it is music nonetheless.

There was an article circulating recently by someone advocating for a boycott of the worship industry. What he meant by the worship industry was the business organizations that help promote and market the songs that people are writing

for churches to sing at their weekly services. But even as he challenged the status quo, he still fell into the trap of talking about worship through the typical church lens—**the only expression of worship that the church engages in is music.**

To quote Jonathan Aigner:

“So I’m done with the worship industry. It’s not out of spite. It’s not out of false piety or sensationalism. It’s a matter of conscience. I can’t do it anymore.

“I won’t buy their music. I won’t listen to their radio stations. I won’t go to their concerts. I won’t purchase their songbooks. I won’t attend or serve a church that does without speaking up.”

What do I get from this article? **Worship = Music.**

Since when did worship become the sole expression of worship?

I have imagined at times getting the opportunity to interview Jesus around my kitchen table. We sit down with a mug of coffee, and we chat about life and my kids, and then He looks at me and makes this poignant statement.

“So, with everything that was written about Me and all that was written about the early church, tell Me how you came up with the format for what you guys do on Sunday morning? I am especially curious about the thing you call worship. You know I talked about worship right? To the Samaritan woman at the well?”

“Well, Jesus, um, You see, yeah, I remember the woman at the well. You talked about worship in spirit and truth. Yeah, as I recall it now, You didn’t actually mention music at all. I think you sang a hymn once though? And the early church ... hmm, well, see, I know that the book of Acts describes the ritual of the early church pretty clearly and it does seem to leave out any musical expressions. I don’t recall any mention of

music."

Now I know at this point you are ready to send me a nasty email reminding me about a "small" part of the Bible called the book of Psalms and all the mentions of music in the Old Testament but before you do, let me remind you of something.

I am a musical worship pastor at a church. I have a high value for musical expressions of worship.

But what I have an ever higher value for is truth.

Jesus actually defines worship for us in the book of John.

"Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. Yet the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. For the Father seeks such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth'" (John 4:21-24).

Jesus doesn't talk about singing, a service, music, CCLI, praise charts or three-part harmonies at all! He says that only form of valid worship is something that comes from the spirit. He even points out that the outward manifestation of worship that she was asking about (Which mountain do we worship on? What's the right outward expression?) **was not even the right question to ask.**

Why is it so important to get an accurate description for what worship really is? Because if we don't, we end up setting ourselves up to engage in idolatry. You see, **religion always wants a physical expression detached from an inward reality.** We want an idol to worship or an act to participate in that we can point to and say, "Look, we did it!" If we are not careful, the musical expressions of worship we so highly value

at this point in church history could ultimately become an idol to us. If the music you are playing and the songs you are singing are not helping you engage in real “spirit and truth” worship, then you could fall into the trap that many throughout history have fallen into—**religious activity without any actual spiritual work taking place.**

Even Paul weighs in on this subject in his writings to the Roman believers.

“I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service of worship” (Rom. 12:1).

Your spiritual worship is a presentation of your whole self in every moment of every day. This opens up your options of worship far beyond the musical variety. We worship God when we walk in humility and serve others. We worship God when we take care of the sick, when we respond to those in need and when we give our money. Why is it worship? Because it is responding to both the Spirit of God and the truth of who Jesus is in our lives.

This is one of my favorite descriptions of worship.

“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Col. 3:23).

Worship is not a song, a band, a CD, a concert or a conference. **Worship is a lifestyle, a living, breathing, day-by-day response to who God is.**

However, one of the most important ways we worship is when we gather together in services on a weekly basis. The corporate expression of worship should always be an overflow of the individual daily encounters with Jesus. Just as our personal worship is a natural response to encountering Jesus, the

corporate expression is a way for the body of Christ to join in unity and one voice to declare His worthiness together. Don't misunderstand me, I do believe that music can be one of the most powerful forms of worship when the people who are singing are engaging in "spirit and truth." *Without it, however, it is just religious activity.*

So what do you think? What does your life of worship look like? What are the places you can worship God this week outside the musical expression?

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