

What Sets the Gathered Church Apart From the World?

What makes the gathered church different? Unique? What are our distinctives?

From the outside, many of our modern churches don't look too different than the nightclub down the street. So, what sets us apart?

It can't be our musical quality. The world has plenty of that.

It can't be our production. The world has plenty of that.

It can't be how much fun we have. The world has more than enough of that.

That's not to say quality, production, and fun is wrong or unimportant. But it's not enough to justify *church*. If all we're doing is entertaining people with amazing music, flashy production, and good times, we're not fulfilling our mission as the church. That's the hard truth.

The argument has been made that the church should be the most creative place on the planet. On one hand, I agree with this. We as Christians should have a massive imagination because of the God we serve. He is beyond glorious. But at the same time it's not enough.

Is there a way to combine crazy creativity and yet still maintain who we are as the gathered church? It is an important question to answer.

I was recently having a conversation with someone about using secular songs in church. The church he was talking about literally used a secular song in worship. I know of plenty others that do so as an opener or means of illustrating the message. I don't have a problem with this, per se, but think

we need to be careful.

It begs for a deeper question:

Why do we do church? We don't need a lower quality version of what the world offers. Sinners who are coming to church aren't coming because of the cool music, production, or to hear music they hear on the radio. They were either dragged to church by a family member or they are in desperate need of change. They have a vague sense that they "need God" in their lives.

The Power of Habits

Let's get real. Humans are shaped by habits. Aristotle told us, "We are what we repeatedly do." Our lives aren't defined by the big moments. They are defined by small decisions we make every day.

If you think about it, corporate worship is a habit. It's something we do week in and week out. It's a routine. And routines shape how we think, what we do, who we are. If that doesn't strike some holy fear in your worship set planning I don't know what will. It is a huge responsibility.

As worship teams we are helping shape people's lives. We are providing them context to see their true identity. We are helping people find their place in the story God is writing. So everything we do is intentional. I appreciate the bold, blunt way Mike Cosper puts it in his book *Rhythms of Grace*:

"A church that gathers each week with cold seriousness, lofty architecture, dense language, and grumpy upper-middle-class white people is making a statement about the kingdom. Those who congregate there weekly are being formed into a kind of community. Likewise, a church with smoke, lights, rock-star worship leaders, and celebrity pastors is forming a particular kind of community. How we gather shapes who we are and what we believe, both explicitly (through the actual content of the songs, prayers, and sermons) and implicitly (through the

culture ethos and personas).”

We can't just have church. We can't just entertain God's people. We can't just create a safe, social alternative to the bar down the street. We need to craft services and experiences that hit the target of who we are as the people of God.

5 Distinctives of the Gathered Church

So who are we? What makes us different? Why would people want to come to your church?

1. The gospel. The gospel isn't something you hear once and move on to “greater things.” The gospel should be the center of every gathering and the centerpiece of our every day. We are prone to wander, prone to forget. We need to be reminded continually that Jesus came, Jesus died, and Jesus rose again. This is what defines us as the people of God. This is the good news that never grows old. If it ever feels like old news, it's not the gospel's fault. It's our own hearts.

2. The Holy Spirit. What happens when the people of God come together? The Holy Spirit is there. The Holy Spirit is moving, awakening, drawing hearts. He's healing, speaking, working wonders. This is what sets our gatherings apart. We aren't just gathering to remember but to experience a fresh outpouring of God's love and grace through power of the Holy Spirit. Worship Leaders, this is the biggest game changer for you. Stop taking yourself so seriously and get to know the Holy Spirit more.

3. Communion. There's something about the habit of gathering around the cross and partaking of the Lord's Supper together as the body of Christ. It may be the most powerful habit in the life of a Christian. This is a distinctive of our gatherings—we're remembering our true identity. We're remembering that apart from the cross we have no hope.

4. Participation. What sets church services apart from

concerts is that everyone has a responsibility. Sure, at a rock show people sing and go crazy, but it's not their responsibility to. As the church, we are all called to bring something. It's not simply a place to watch the professionals do their thing and be inspired.

Let's go a little deeper. Where else in the world do people gather for the purpose of singing together? The church is a gathering of people from all walks of life who come together to sing. We gather to participate.

5. Mission. It's not our calling to simply have great meetings or to love the message. Or to love the worship. The church gathers so that we can be reminded of our mission. We are called to be sent. We can't just appreciate the gospel, we need to share it. If our gatherings lose this sense of mission and "going", we've missed the point.

What would you add to this list? What makes us unique and how do we hit that target each week in our services?

David Santistevan *is the worship pastor at Allison Park Church in Pittsburgh. For the original article, visit .*