

Dear Worship Pastor: It's Not About You

December 30, 2012 by Timothy Dalrymple

from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/philosophicalfragments/2012/12/30/dear-worship-pastor-its-not-about-you/>

Dear Worship Pastor,

I enjoy praise and worship. I really do. And I appreciate the enormous effort and the talent that goes into excellent worship leadership. I hesitate to admit the following, because it seems like someone with a theology doctorate ought to be motivated by more cerebral concerns, but a significant (major but not main) part of why I made Perimeter Church my home church is because I enjoy it so much when Laura Story (whose “Blessings” won a Grammy this past year) leads worship there. That woman has an anointing; that’s the only way I can explain it. I am moved by her voice and her worship leadership.

So this is nothing against contemporary praise and worship music, which I genuinely like. And it’s nothing against worship leaders, most of whom I also like. And, by the way, please don’t bother trying to figure out whom this is aimed toward, because (a) you’re wrong and (b) it’s not aimed toward anyone in particular.

But it has happened so often over the years that I’ve seen worship leaders fail to lead. And by fail to lead, I mean “They went where no one could follow.” And, after all these years, I thought I’d say something.

Imagine the following scenario. A church service begins, and the music breaks in. The congregation warms up, and the music grows more intense. Yes, we all know the progression by now — the video “Sunday’s Coming” was so funny because it was so true — and yet the progression is there for a reason. It’s rooted in human nature. You get our attention, hopefully with some praise music not entirely devoid of theological content, and then you gradually press us deeper into more profound surrender to the will of God.

—And then it happens. The worship “leader” raises everything an octave, starts launching off into the musical stratosphere, and suddenly he’s the only one singing. No one else can sing that high. So everyone stands there watching. They’re no longer participating in worship together; they’re observing a vocal performance. And those who really want to sing are completely thrown off.

I know, I know. I must be completely immature. A wiser and more gracious Christian would surely find some way to continue in a worshipful manner, perhaps praying the words he cannot sing. And a more musically gifted person might naturally slip down to a lower register that works. But I find both of those things difficult. So instead, I find myself stewing. Doesn’t he see that 75 percent of the people in the church just stopped singing? Doesn’t he see some people trying to follow him, hearing their voices crack, and then giving up? Most of the men in

particular just stand there feeling awkward until the pitch drops back down and they can join in again.

I want to tell the worship pastor, and so I'm telling you now: if no one's following, you ain't leading.

Of course, there are other ways of losing your followers. Sometimes worship leaders seem to be having a profound personal worship experience, and completely forgetting that there are hundreds of other people in the room who don't really want to repeat the chorus fifty times over, or who need to know the words before you sing them, or who don't know what to do if no one on the worship team sings the melody. When worship pastors do these things, they're worshipping, but they're not leading worship.

During my undergraduate years, there was a very gifted young man whose eyes literally rolled back in his head when he reached the high-point of the worship experience. I was glad he was having such a good time, and I never said anything to him personally. But it really looked freaky. He kinda looked possessed. I'm sure it scared off some new students, because it was enough to scare Freddy Krueger. However, when he was informed that people were weirded out to see nothing but the whites of his fluttering eyes, to his great credit he recognized immediately that he was not leading well. He gave up the "possessed" look because he realized it was shoving people out of the body of corporate worship.

So, yes, it's impressive that you can sing that high. It's impressive that you can run that melisma all over God's creation. And it's impressive that you can enter into some kind of ecstatic trance and repeat the words interminably or else make up new words on the spot. But worship leadership is not about you. And if I'm spending time being impressed with your transcendent musical talents, or else stewing that you seem more concerned to display those talents than properly to lead a congregation, then I'm not spending that time worshipping God. And that, after all, is the point. Not admiring you, but worshipping God.

You're great. You really are. Your music is beautiful, you have a killer collection of designer t-shirts, and I'm sure you have a great personality. And when you come down off that mountaintop and you're full of radiant smiles, I'm genuinely happy for you. But you should know that you left the rest of us stranded somewhere on the mountainside.

Or maybe it's just me. Anyway, thanks for listening.