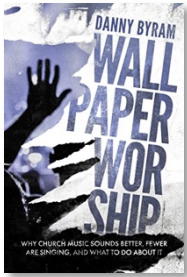


[Review] *Wallpaper Worship: Why Church Music Sounds Better, Fewer Are Singing, and What to Do about It*, by Danny Byram



MICHAEL T. BALONEK

Michael T. Balonek is Adjunct Professor of Ethnomusicology at Liberty University. His PhD is from the University of Allahabad's Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute (India), and his dissertation was titled, "Exploring Social and Cultural Change, Stability, and Trends: An Ethnomusicological Study of Bhojpuri Music in North India." Living in India since 2012, he holds the Sangeet Prabhakar: Tabla (Tabla Music Performance and Theory) degree from the Prayag Sangeet Samiti (India), a master's degree in ethnomusicology from Bethel University (USA), and a bachelor's in music education from SUNY Potsdam.



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Trends and opinions about musical worship in the church change frequently, and it seems that the rate of such transitions has only increased in recent times. Sometimes the changes have been about the acceptability of certain instruments and styles for Christian use. Can we use guitars? Can we use pianos? What about drums? Must the music be a cappella? Other times, the change and subsequent debate have been about the *function* of music in the church. Why do we have music in the church? Is it primarily a spectator event, or participatory? *Wallpaper Worship* focuses on the function of music in worship, making the case for returning to a more participatory form of musical worship in the Christian church.

Danny Byram describes the term “wallpaper worship” as background filler which beautifies a room but is not the focal point—much like music in a number of churches today. He looks at the passive ways in which we experience music—in elevators, stores, restaurants—and the decreasing ways in which the modern American actively takes part in (or even actively listens to) music. While the beautification of one’s surroundings is a good goal, worship in the Bible and in much of church history has been active. Byram claims that even during times in history when only a specialist led, worshipers still focused on the words and tunes being performed by the leader. A more passive listening, with music as a beautifying, enticing background element, Byram proposes, has crept into the Christian church. For some congregations, music has become little more than the announcement of the introduction to the service. In describing what this looks like, Byram considers the actions of a congregation during a service in which the musicians on stage play with precision and excellence:

about 80 percent of the people were visibly disengaged from what was happening on the stage. Some were chatting in small groups; some were nestled into theatre-style seats sipping coffee. Most of those present were merely standing on their feet watching the band play and sing. As sincere as these musicians seemed and as great as the music sounded, the people in



the congregation were not connecting to the songs. It was painful to watch the musicians playing their hearts out, mouthing meaningful lyrics to a crowd that was, for the most part, paying them no attention. (14)

The basic premise of *Wallpaper Worship* is that the church in the twenty-first century should return musical worship to its rightful place: an experiential time of praising the Creator, not merely an introduction or background filler. To paraphrase John Piper's *Let the Nations Be Glad*, worship is eternal. There will be a day when preaching is no longer needed, but worship of the Eternal God will remain.¹ Therefore, I agree with Byram's premise in this book, and the case that he makes for bringing musical worship back into a place of more importance, both in the congregational gatherings of the church and in the lives of individual believers.

In the introduction, Byram introduces and then develops this theme, looking at passivity and active engagement in musical settings, both within and outside of the church. Chapter 1 then launches a multi-chapter theology of worship. To make his point about contemporary use of music in the church, Byram looks at examples from scripture, with title headings such as "The Purpose of Worship," "The Characteristics of Worship," and "The Results of Worship."

The book comprises three sections of a few chapters each:

- Part One: What Worship Is
 - Worship Is Our Heritage
 - Worship Is Our Privilege
 - Worship Is Our Duty
- Part Two: What Worship Isn't
 - Worship Isn't Casual
 - Worship Isn't Deeds
 - Worship Isn't Music
- Part Three: What Worship Can Be
 - Three Things Missed in Traditional Worship
 - Three Things Missed in Contemporary Worship
 - Three Principles of Planning: Participation, (un)Predictability, Power
 - Three Essentials of Evaluation: Declare, Respond, Devotion
 - Our Legacy of Worship: What Will We Pass On?

Lest the reader think that the author merely looks at history with rose-colored lenses as "the good old days," Byram does point out that

Biblical and church history is rife with periods when believers gathered to worship, but the worship which they practiced had little resemblance to the intent behind it. In those situations,

¹ Piper, John. *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010.

the worshippers may have “done their thing” but may not have experienced God’s presence in ways they were hoping. (52)

He then highlights some times like this in scripture and in history, when followers of God have missed the mark in their worship of him, beginning with the time of Moses, through the Reformation, and beyond. Byram discusses how these “wrongs” noticed after the fact could be “righted,” lest we pursue a similar path as Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10. They were given very clear instructions on their duties in the worship of God in group and personal settings, and yet they disregarded what God had clearly revealed, so suffering the consequences of their disobedience. In another instance of taking this beyond music, Byram implores musical leaders to live in ways that glorify God. “It is important to understand that God considers the gap between that which is holy and that which is profane to be wide and deep. We who carry His name must share His view and be as appalled as He is at how narrow the gap between the holy and profane can be in our own lives” (107).

The past twenty years have seen a number of books on worship. Some, like InterVarsity’s *Worship Team Handbook* (1999), focus on the practical, physical, musical aspects of leading worship in a group setting. Others, like Matt Redman’s *Heart of Worship Files* (2010), look at the *reasons why* we worship God. Unlike most of the recent books about worship in the church, however, Byram spends little time describing purely musical or “practical aspects” of leading worship (instruments to use, styles to emulate, tips and techniques for a worship leader). Rather, this reads as an impassioned plea to church leadership and lay folk about the larger picture, filled with theological and historical examples of musical worship down the ages, and of the church’s view of musical worship through the years. He only briefly mentions styles of music, which he emphasizes are less important than the larger topics of “why” and “how” in worship. Terms such as contemporary/free and liturgical are mentioned only very briefly, pointing out that both can be used to truly glorify God, and conversely that both can be devoid of any true connection if the focus of the hearts and minds of the congregants is far from God and his glory. He briefly compares and contrasts these two forms of musical worship, but primarily points out that either can be acceptable or not acceptable as true worship. In emphasizing this, Byram presents “Three Things Missed in Contemporary Worship” and “Three Things Missed in Traditional Worship.” Overall, this book fills a gap in the literature on worship by emphasizing the change in function and seeming reduction of importance in the music of the twenty-first century church, relegating music to a background decoration that can be ignored during discussions over coffee, rather than the biblical and historical place that musical worship has held in other eras and places.

The book’s major shortcoming is that its many “sermon illustrations” rely heavily on American (USA) cultural idioms—from movies like *A Christmas Story* and *The Perfect Storm* to NCAA basketball, to discussions about the American Civil War. But I believe this book is too important to limit it only to American culture. The topics covered are given universal application, but the introductory sections seem very centered on American pop culture. That’s the only negative criticism I have of this important work. Its thesis and main points are clear, and they are all very important in my opinion as a musician and a worshiper of God. I recommend *Wallpaper Worship* not only for those involved in worship ministries but also for anyone involved in church ministry,

from pastors and elders to ushers and laypeople. “Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!” (Psalm 67:3, NIV).

