

THE SOUND OF WORSHIP

The Christian church in the twenty-first century is a most complex entity. Indeed we may very well ask how a relatively small group of followers of Jesus Christ evolved over 2000 years into a “church” of so much diversity and schism that it is hard to recognize any kind of cohesive structure. According to Wikipedia there are in excess of 38,000 distinct denominations of the Christian church.¹ There are at least two reasons to be interested in understanding the Christian church. It is arguably the most successful religion in known history. The Church is also big business. It is a primary consumer of the services and products that acoustical firms and media systems sales and integration companies have to offer. Understanding the Church in all its complexity is critical if we are to succeed in providing the Church with services and products appropriate to its mission.

There certainly are many ways to analyze and categorize the Church. We could group churches based on a common theology, a shared history, or a shared governance philosophy. And of course any attempt at doing so would generate a considerable list of *outliers*, churches that defy categorization. It is also difficult because it is not at all clear, even to people who describe themselves as Christians, which groups are a part of the Church and which do not make the cut.

If we zoom out far enough, we can begin to see groupings, especially with respect to how church people interact with church buildings. If we further refine the study, and consider expectations for the way the rooms sound (i.e., the acoustics of the spaces and the way media, especially sound systems, are used), we can begin to see distinct patterns in the chaos.

As it turns out, it is the *style* of worship that is the most accurate predictor of the kind of acoustic space and sound system required or preferred for any given church. Of course the style of worship is rooted in ecclesiology and to some degree in theology as well. There are four worship styles that are utilized by the vast majority of twenty-first-century Christian churches in America.

The first could be known by many names, but perhaps the best is the *Celebratory style*. These are the churches that follow a liturgy rich with tradition that culminates in the celebration of what some call the Mass, others the Divine Liturgy. Second, we will consider the *Evangelical style*, which focuses on the proclamation of the Word and personal salvation. The third is the *Experiential style*, which emphasizes the experience of the power of God to change lives. Finally there is the *Community style*, which is an expression of unity and commitment among believers.

As soon as we create a taxonomy of churches, someone will discover a church that does not seem to fit. This is likely true of this taxonomy as well. There are probably no churches that fit these descriptions exactly, and many churches that may fit into more than one category. This being said, the majority of American Christian churches will fit *better* in one of these categories than in the others. The architect, acoustician, and systems provider will better understand the Church as a client if these four worship styles are understood.

So how do you start with Jesus and wind up 2000 years later with this “church”? To begin to understand where all this complexity comes from and why it matters, we need to look back to the origins of the Church.

End Note

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_denominations, accessed 01/10.