

## A Brief Theology of Volume Levels in Worship

(Zac Hicks)

Regardless of your tradition, volume may be one of the top three perennial “unsolvable” problems in worship planning and leading. No matter which way you go, someone is unhappy. Too loud? People feel discouraged from singing because they can’t hear themselves. Too soft? People feel discouraged from singing because they *can* hear themselves! And this isn’t merely a problem for churches with million-dollar sound systems and rock aesthetics. It’s a problem I’ve heard articulated by folks who feel the organ is too loud (or too soft) in a traditional service. There are people with hearing problems or hearing sensitivities that complain about how worship can be literally *painful* to endure. Yet others don’t have a formulated reason beyond “I don’t like it.” I can’t tell you how many times I’ve received a prayer card disguised as a complaint about volume: “Please pray for the drummer who feels it’s his job to make us all deaf” is a paraphrase of one “prayer card” I received years ago on a Monday morning. So, yes, volume is a hot issue.

### No Resolution?

And it also seems like it’s not a resolvable issue. Inevitably, if you make a decision which sides with one group’s persuasion, you are deciding directly and actively *against* another group’s persuasion. For those of us in charge of making these decisions, it feels lose-lose. My general opinion about volume levels has been a kind of happy medium: loud enough that the music fills the space, encouraging the people to sing out without feeling exposed, yet in the quieter moments offers key times where the congregation can clearly hear themselves singing mightily. For me, when I have strived for that, it seems that the complaints have gone down to a minimum (not completely gone!) and musical worship has been most strengthened. However, I think there’s something slightly more nuanced—more pastoral—at play here.

If you’ve read my book, you know it’s my belief that every decision we make in worship is a *pastoral* one, whether we know it or not. In other words, nothing in worship—not even decibel level—is outside the governance of faithful, biblical reflection. I’d like to offer some brief biblical and pastoral reflections on volume level in hopes that worship leaders, sound technicians, and congregants alike can see that they are all participating in real, biblical, pastoral work as they process and facilitate the “sound environment” of their worship spaces. And to do this, we turn once again to worship’s great biblical barometer—the Psalms.

### 1. The Bible tells us worship should be LOUD.

Listen to these commands: “Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts” (Psalm 33:3); “Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!” (Psalm 47:1); “Praise him with loud clashing cymbals!” (Psalm 150:5). Joy, again and again in the Psalms, seems to be associated with pushing the faders up, pressing the organ volume pedal to the floor, and turning the amps up to eleven. The joy of salvation and deliverance is expressed in *shouts* (Psalm 20:5; 27:6; 32:7, 11; 33:1; 35:27; 42:4; 47:5; 65:8; 66:1; 81:1; 89:15; 126:2; 132:9). Trumpets (no mutes in the ancient Near East) were *blasted* (Ps 47:5; 98:6; 150:3). So it seems that the *loud* end of the dynamic spectrum is appropriate for worship music.

## 2. The Bible tells us worship should be SOFT.

Equally present in the Psalms is the expression on the other end of the sonic spectrum. “I have calmed and quieted my soul” is what one worship song sings (Psalm 131:2). Psalm 95 provides that contrast. Verses 1-5 express loud, thankful, jubilant worship. But Verses 6-7 encourage a different posture: bowed, quiet, reverent. Alongside the admonitions to leap, clap, and shout are the edifying words that whisper “be still” (Ps 37:7; 46:10) and “wait” (Ps 25:5, 21; 33:20; 37:7; 130:5). As one desperate worship song puts it, “For God alone my soul waits in silence” (Ps 62:1,5). In the Psalms, therefore, we hear that low decibels, even a zero *reading*, are appropriate for worship music.

### Pastoral Choices That Lead to “Faithful Feelings”

So if we look to the Scriptures for a “biblical theology of volume in worship,” we hear something that defies almost all our categories. We hear a word that tells us that God wants it all—the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. It’s not so much, then, of whether worship should be loud or soft, but *at what moments*. How might we navigate this wide spectrum as faithful pastors? Well, it might start by recognizing our job as emotional shepherds. We have a role in faithfully guiding the people of God through a holistic experience (emotions included) of worship’s rhythms and story. What if we began to see volume not as something that needed to be solved with a one-size-fits-all level that works for the most people? What if we understood that volume was an affective tool to faithfully and pastorally wield in the art and craft of disciple making? What if we got our musicians, sound technicians, and congregants on board with a mode of thinking that worship is a journey through a story, and that story has ups and downs, highs and lows, louds and softs? What if our congregation learned how to be more faithfully *Christian “feelers”* of the loud and raucous joy of God’s glory and salvation, of the quiet contrition of confession and repentance, of the piercing moans and groans of lamentation, of the weary sighs of mourning? What if our noise trained us to be more faithful Davids who were loud in their gladness to enter the house of the Lord (Ps 122:1)? What if our silence trained us to be more faithful “watchmen” who quietly waited for the morning (Ps 130:6)?

And now we can see how our aesthetic choices about dynamics are really opportunities for pastoring. We see now that from the electric guitarist’s amp level, to the organist’s use of their antiphonal division, to the sound tech’s fingers on the main faders—these are all moments where every believer can take up their call as a “priest” in ministering to their sister and their brother. Hopefully a post like this can open up fresh dialogue on a topic that in many churches feels weary, old, or hardened.

<http://www.zachicks.com/blog/2016/11/14/a-brief-theology-of-volume-levels-in-worship.html>

