
Worship and the Kingdom of God

Robert Thiessen with Anne Thiessen

When I saw that “Worship and Witness” was the topic for this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*, I immediately thought, as perhaps some of you did also, of John Piper’s well-known and repeated declaration: “Missions exists because worship doesn’t. . . . Worship therefore is the fuel and goal of missions.”¹ In *Global Church Planting*, Craig Ott and Gene Wilson add, “Worship is the goal because when all else passes away, worship will be the occupation of the church for all eternity. It is our Great Calling, from eternity past to eternity future.” They quote (with added emphasis) Paul’s opening to Ephesians (1:13–14): “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, . . . to the praise of his glory.”² Christopher Wright adds: “We could say that mission exists because praise does. The praise of the church is what energizes and characterizes it for mission.”³

In this essay, I will concentrate on the aspect of visible worship in the gathered church, focusing particularly on the issue of cultural imposition.⁴ Despite contextualization being widely written about in mission literature and acknowledged by many missionaries, cultural imposition remains a problem.

I realize that my experience in Latin America (since the late eighties) could be different from what others know about worship in the rest of the globe. I

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1 John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 11.

2 Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 397–98.

3 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 134.

4 There are many other parts of church and individual life that could be considered worship, such as caring for widows and orphans, but I think that most readers’ initial response to the word “worship” involves those things that most groups practice during their communal “church service.” (In Spanish, the word for worship services is *culto*, which literally means “worship.”)

write with the awareness that there are many types of cross-cultural mission and church formation ministries, with a wide range of how issues within these ministries have been, and are being, engaged. However, in reading journals and books that cover this wide range, and when I discuss this topic with missionaries engaged elsewhere, I perceive that the concerns I carry—summarized as cultural imposition—are not limited to the places I am familiar with.

Another significant factor affecting my perspective is that I am mostly familiar with the efforts of missionaries and churches that fit broadly into the evangelical family (including Pentecostals) of the church. In Latin America there are very few other parts of the church starting new works in the dominant culture or that are involved among people who have not heard the Good News of Jesus. The Roman Catholic Church is obviously active, and commendable in some ways in this arena, but their long tradition of introducing male leadership structures (requiring many years of study) and rituals that do not arise from the local culture makes it even more difficult for them to allow for contextualized worship.

We can start an exploration of worship by simply stating that the church worships. This much we can agree on, even if we don't agree on what worship means or entails. The worship of God is the fitting air that we all need to breathe.

But this—like Piper's statement that "Missions exists because worship doesn't"—is perhaps too easy to say and too hard to pin down. What is the deep pool of assumptions behind these kinds of catchphrases? My concern is how such brief, unnuanced phrases that are easily repeated and superficially attractive can shape not just the Western church but also, by extension, our mission efforts globally. I am particularly concerned when the church exports its own expressions of worship to other people groups, with too little reflection about cultural differences that can easily decrease the relevancy of given expressions of worship in church gatherings. Without such reflection, these phrases can become a quip, a "jingoism" summarizing one's missiology in potentially counterproductive ways.

When Piper's statement is taken too simplistically, for instance, it can result in insistence that we (from whatever cultural background we reflect) know what worship should look like for people who live in cultures that are very different from our own. Additionally, the frequent Western assumption that leadership preparation takes at least a couple years on top of a couple-year period of proving maturity (especially when there is an emphasis on formal degrees) may result in an outsider leading public worship for a significant initial period. And an insistence that the Bible is inspired (meaning, the *missionary's* understanding of it is rarely questioned) may inhibit self-reflection on the insufficiency of our own theology. These factors, among others, can contribute to a pattern of cultural engagement where the missionary assumes the really important things are

already figured out, leaving little space for local people to develop their own theology and worship that reflects their own context.

So why does an insistence on worship in missions result in the kind of narrowness I have observed? Why do so many new churches all over the world look so much like the churches of the foreigners who initiated the work? The songs might include translated lyrics, but, for the most part, little else reflects the local culture. The prayers sound a lot like the home country's, even when spoken in a different language—the tone, the pauses, the filler words, the theology all vary little from the country of origin.

That said, I want to be careful to acknowledge that, over time, many churches in Latin America have since adopted aspects of their local culture in matters of tempo and exuberance. The process, however, has taken fifty years or longer and has been fraught with contention. And even today, many groups hold on to patterns established long ago by North American missionaries.

Regardless of the level of acculturation that the more established churches have attained, it is telling how they pursue their own cross-cultural mission among the First Nation peoples around them. Here in Mexico, they usually impose their own patterns and theology at the very least. Worse, they do this without the benefit of using the indigenous language.

Thankfully, today most missionaries understand the need for local expression and place a much deeper emphasis on contextualization. I rarely must argue for the goal of indigeneity. The problem of cultural imposition hasn't diminished sufficiently, however. The practice of worship—the how to—is still debated. The most significant pushback I receive comes from practitioners whose starting point is that God needs to be worshiped, rather than that there is One seeking a relationship in which our worship is “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23).

This quote from Jesus, in the middle of his interaction with the Samaritan woman, is his response to the woman's assumption that he, a good Jewish teacher, would demand that true worship happen in his own cultural center, Jerusalem. She wonders if her own people's practice of worshipping on the local mountain isn't at least as good. In response, Jesus gives all the permission we'll ever need to walk with different people into something we can't yet imagine, nor define from beforehand. He says, “But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:22–23 NLT).

In light of this, many missionaries agree in theory that indigeneity is desirable and that Jesus gives us freedom to pursue it. Yet, in practice, some Western missionaries still find it difficult to foster this in practical ways. I believe that the following outline of traditional mission practice will help explain why. The more differences there are between the sender and receiver cultures, especially in areas of privilege, wealth, and education, the greater will be the effects of these points. This is roughly what happens:

- The missionary arrives in a place they have little understanding of.
- The missionary begins language learning and acculturation but often does so formally (not relationally).
- The missionary shares the gospel as they already understand it, often without knowing much about the local culture or its dynamics of honor vs. shame, or power vs. fear, as described by Jayson Georges in *The 3D Gospel*.⁵ People begin to accept the missionary's understanding of the universe and gather together because even this truncated and foreign gospel is still Good News.
- The missionary leads the group, since all the rest of the people are new to this way of understanding and, in the missionary's estimation, not ready for leadership. This means that the missionary leads in the form they already know, taking style, content, order, liturgy, and sacraments from their home culture. There are often some modifications in externals but no changes at the core of worship practices. An example would be serving communion on the first Sunday of the month with individual tiny cups of local juice accompanied by slivers of a local starch (reflecting both theological and hygienic concerns of the missionary).
- The missionary begins to raise up local leadership, usually six months to two years later, choosing those most responsive to their leadership—the ones who most adopt the missionary-established forms. Local leadership develops along the pattern laid out.
- The missionary gradually releases aspects of leadership: music is often first, next prayers, and finally, preaching.
- The local leaders who most respond to the missionary's direction rise faster. These are the ones who most do things the way the outsider is doing them. The situation becomes even more complicated when these leaders are paid by the missionary.
- The missionary leaves an established church with local leaders. These local leaders are the ones who deviated the least from the outsiders' pat-

⁵ Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (San Bernardino: TimePress, 2014).

terns and theology. They can even be more adamant than the missionary about maintaining some of the established practices (Matt 23:15).

Laying out the traditional model of church planting this way makes it easy to see why conformity in worship, among other areas, arises in new church plants that are birthed through this model. Such conformity is inevitable. How could it be otherwise? But I think this kind of worship pains God, for whom creativity most describes the beginning and sustaining of our universe. Cultural imposition also carries with it a great disrespect for others as well as an ignorance of the price they pay, often without even knowing it. It can never be a holistic witness of who God really is.

Ott and Wilson in *Global Church Planting* lament the broad use of the traditional process outlined above. They identify it as the pastoral church planting model rather than the apostolic model practiced by Paul in the New Testament, where new churches did not depend on the missionary for their leaderships:

Though the apostolic approach to church planting is not necessarily the best approach in every setting, it is the approach that has been most often blessed by God in launching locally sustainable and reproducing church-planting movements. Unfortunately, most Western church planters have never observed it, were not trained in it, and thus hardly consider it as an alternative to the way they have seen churches planted in their home context. Even cross-cultural church planters tend to assume that apart from a few cultural adjustments they should plant churches as they have been planted in their home culture. But this will seldom lead to indigenous church multiplication.⁶

I've told the following story before in this journal, but it bears repeating here: Anne and I began our work among First Nations of Mexico with the Mixtecos of southern Mexico. We were living there, learning language and culture, trying to fit into their world. A small group of believers already worshipped together as the first evangelical church in this high mountain region. Two of their leaders had been martyred (separately) the previous year. The group lived in fear for their lives every day, facing many levels of persecution. They were mostly monolingual, with a few of the younger men knowing enough Spanish to sell goods in the city markets. We soon realized that during their worship services, four times a week, the only Mixtec used was for the transitions of "sit down," "stand up," "let's pray," and a very rough translation of the antiquated Spanish biblical text chosen for the day. A couple of the young men led the service in their broken Spanish. When we asked about this, why they didn't at least pray

⁶ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 90.

in Mixtec, the leaders quite ingenuously asked, “Wouldn’t God be angry with us if we used our poor speech to address him?” This, from people willing to lay down their lives to follow Jesus, unaware of how much he longed to free them from the shame of being marginalized.

Even though this story is from close to thirty years ago, I see many different iterations of it still today. I am involved in mentoring and connecting among a wide range of indigenous groups in southern Mexico, and not much has changed.

When a missionary perceives a lack of worship as the primary issue, they tend to emphasize the individual’s and culture’s inadequacy or wrongness. With this focus, things like injustice and marginalization, and poverty and deprivation become secondary concerns, often only addressed as a means to get at what is seen as of first importance.

I think that the above sequence also shows where a missionary’s approach could be different. It could all start before they even leave their own culture. They could reflect seriously on the model of Jesus, who, even while still in his own culture—ever present with God and the angelic hosts—knew he had to leave his world behind, taking nothing with him but his identity as he ventured out into our crazy world. While there are other lessons to be gleaned here, it is this “leaving” that has bearing on the present topic. In order for us to be incarnational (Phil 2:5–8), we, too, must leave behind much that we assume and value as we learn from those we serve. And in those first few years, if the missionary is learning like a babe and then a young child, and refraining from imposing their own understanding and culture, they will have time and space to reflect on those things. They can be discerning what is cultural and what might be supra-cultural. Of course, a few good missionary anthropology books will help that process.

Could we learn from local people not only their language but also how they think about the spiritual realm? About what really matters? The nature of humanity? What sin or brokenness means for them? Might we begin to understand the terrible hellishness of being marginalized and subjugated? If our preconceptions about these arenas and how God sees them don’t change through contact with another culture, how can we learn?

Would we be willing to leave behind the privilege of reading the Bible if those we were called to serve were an oral people? Would we forgo private devotions for five years to understand better how communal peoples find succor and knowledge? Would we fully live like locals if we end up among the poor? How far can we imagine we might need to go to follow the model of Jesus, commanded by Paul, in Philippians 2:5–8?

Once one begins true acculturation, there is then room for next steps, most of which will show themselves. Without this kind of beginning, there can be very little movement toward genuine indigenous worship that is meaningful.

But with it, we will see worship that arises from people who, for the first time, grasp the goodness of God, who provides for them beyond what they can imagine yet. Then they can know the love and honor that the father in the parable of the prodigal son shows (by running out to them while they are still far off, and by bestowing on them all the honor of being children, not servants, without reservation). When they see that the (international) community around them comes to the festival of welcome, eating the local food, then they will praise God for themselves. Not because of what has been done in some far-off place that bears little resemblance to their world, nor with words and externals formed by someone else's history, but through their own expression of the kingdom.

I believe that the Anabaptist family of the church is perhaps the tradition that leaves the most room for this kind of thinking and practice. We emphasize the centrality of Jesus Christ and his kingdom—and the way that Jesus reveals God more fully than anything else, including the rest of Scripture outside the Gospels. This should draw us away from a starting point of holiness that distances itself from wretched sinners⁷ and toward a welcoming kingdom of God. Jesus never distanced himself from sinners. In fact, the more wretched that society deemed people, the more he seemed to approach those people with mercy.

Reflecting on Jesus's life as normative should allow us to be learners in a new culture, realizing that his first thirty years were not wasted but, in fact, ministry. We might find it difficult to grasp that Jesus was God among us during those early years, given that the Bible only mentions one extraordinary incident from that time period—when Jesus was twelve, dialoguing with the teachers in the temple. To assume that Jesus's ministry began only after his first thirty years is understandable, but I believe that a richer perspective, and one that is likely truer to reality, is to view all of Jesus's years of learning and adapting as the *beginning* of his ministry rather than a prelude to it.

Remember that Jesus began his public ministry by announcing not a need for worship but the approaching kingdom as Good News. Citing Isaiah, he said:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come. (Luke 4:18–19 NLT)

Jesus's mission statement here should help us keep a wide view of what salvation entails and how we can be part of bringing that to earth.

Yes, as Piper insists, we are created to worship and to draw others into a 24/7 life of worship. But I would broaden Piper's statement from "Missions exists be-

⁷ This kind of holiness is the quality of God that Reformed thinkers like Piper take as their starting point, leading to their focus on a need for worship that preempts the Good News of a relational God of welcome.

cause worship doesn't" to **Missions exists because the kingdom doesn't**. Not fully. And not yet. Where there is no weeping, no hunger, no captivity. Where, yes, we worship our Lord and Maker, in the way that John foretold—coming together from every tribe, ethnicity, tongue, and family (Rev 7:9). Where the gates are never closed and people go in and out of the New Jerusalem that has finally come to earth.

What that worship looks like remains to be seen. At the very least, this vision of the New Jerusalem shows us that corporate worship should reflect local languages, cultural values, and needs. How worship is expressed beyond this deserves much further reflection. And we can only do such reflection well in conjunction with our global family—a privilege and a challenge that will continue until our Lord returns.

Let us all participate in mission, in the myriad of ways that need to unfold, till God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.