



Some Things Remain the Same

—Ron Man

Worship in the Church of Jesus Christ has been characterized by enormous diversity across the centuries and across the world today. This diversity seems to be allowed by the New Testament, which gives us precious little in terms of specific guidelines for the practice of worship in the church—nor even much in the way of actual examples. The implication is that God allows His people considerable latitude in applying godly wisdom to choose and adapt forms for worship that are appropriate to a particular time, place, and people. And so, we find God worshiped with a vast array of different languages, forms, styles, liturgies, dress, music and other art forms.

With all of this diversity, it is appropriate to ask a question: what is unchangeable and non-negotiable in the panoply

Ron Man works in Germany with Greater European Mission, where he gives special attention to worship-related issues. His involvement on the European continent dates to 1969.

of worship options? What are the common denominators without which worship is sub-standard, if not sub-Christian? What are the things that bind and unite true worshipers of every age and locale?

Certainly there are doctrinal boundaries, fundamentals of the faith, which define those who are truly in the faith and therefore are able to worship “in truth” as Jesus commanded (John 4:23-24).

Besides a common doctrinal base,

The Main Thing

Our ultimate purpose in serving God in this world must be to align ourselves with *His* purpose for this world. I would suggest that God’s purpose is summarized (among other places in Scripture) in Psalm 86:9:

All nations whom You have made
Shall come and worship before You, O Lord,
And they shall glorify Your name.

Here we read that God *made* the nations (or peoples); the clear implication is that He has every right to expect their worship, their glorification of Him as their Creator. But not only is this an *expectation*, but also a clear *prediction* that this *will* happen (see also Psalm 22:27-28). The thrust of history and of the Church and of missions is towards that day when a countless throng of worshipers “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9) will join the angelic host around the throne to exclaim, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever!” (5:13). —Ron Man

there are some other vital elements which God has given to ensure continuity and purity in the worship which He engenders, encourages, and delights in from His people. These are things we should look for no matter where we go in the world, and regardless of geographic, racial, ethnic, economic or cultural context. And these are things we should actively encourage in church planting situations and other areas where we might have influence.

1. The Role of the Word of God in Worship

God’s people do not gather to exchange their own ideas about who God is and what He is like; rather worship is our response to what God has revealed Himself to be in the Bible. We gather under the authority of the Word, at the invitation of the Word, and with the guidance of the Word. We gather to learn from and respond to the Word.

The Word of God must permeate all that we do in worship services—certainly in the preaching of the Word, but also in public reading of the Word, praying the Word, meditating on the Word, singing the Word (both through scriptural texts and also texts which faithfully represent scriptural truth). God’s people should respond to Him *as He really is*—that He might receive the glory of which He is worthy. And that means that the Bible must have a central place of honor and use in our services, must form the foundation of all our services and guide and protect our services. If we are to worship *in truth*, we must worship *according to the Word*.

As John Stott put it:

What, then, does it mean to worship God? It is to “glory in His holy name” (Ps. 105:3), that is, to revel adoringly in who He is in his revealed character. But before we can glory in God’s name, we must know it. Hence the propriety of the reading and preaching of the Word of God in public worship, and of Biblical meditation in private devotion. These things are not an intrusion into worship; they form the necessary foundation of it. God must speak to us before we have

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any liberty to speak to Him. He must disclose to us who he is before we can offer him what we are in acceptable worship. The worship of God is always a response to the Word of God. Scripture wonderfully directs and enriches our worship.¹

The Word of God must be honored in our worship because it teaches us about God’s glory.

2. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Worship

The Holy Spirit is responsible for true worship taking place. It is He

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who works in our hearts to show us our need for Christ (John 16:8). It is He who convinces our hearts that God is incomparably lovely and deserving of our worship. It is He who engages both the mind *and* the heart so that worship is an expression of both. It is He who quickens our spirit so that our worship is sincere (“worship in spirit,” John 4:24); and as the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) He illumines the truth of God to us (1 Cor. 2:14), so that we might know Him and respond to Him as He really is (“worship in truth,” John 4:23, 26).

3. The Role of the Congregation in Worship

Regardless of what kind of planning and preparation and practice goes into a service of worship, regardless of what sort of leadership

and tradition and liturgy there happens to be, these things don’t produce true corporate worship. The participation of the *congregation* makes it corporate worship.

Romans 12:1 teaches us to present our bodies—our whole lives—as “a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service worship.” A church service won’t really be a service of corporate worship unless the people of God gather after walking with and worshipping God throughout their week, with full hearts which can then overflow into a common expression of adoration and praise. We must teach our people that worship is a lifestyle, a way of life, not an event.

By definition, corporate worship will also only happen if the people are truly involved in the service. This expression of the unity of the body

and of the priesthood of all believers is not optional. We are *commanded* to minister to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in the assembly (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). The Word of God requires that worship involve all of the people and not be a spectator event or performance.

4. The Role of the Jesus Christ in Worship

Perhaps the most crucial constant in all true worship is that which is least acknowledged: the role of the living Christ in leading our worship. The book of Hebrews teaches us about the *present* ministry of Christ, our *living* High Priest: His perpetual Priesthood, the One through whom we draw near to the throne of grace, the One who sympathizes with our weaknesses, the One who continues

The Centrality of Worship

Foundational points for a theology for worship and missions.

—Dave Hall

1. Worship is central, Missions is not. We Evangelicals have propagated a mind-set in the church and missions that might be best summed up in the adage, “God saved us to save the lost.” The fact is, however that God redeemed us not primarily to do something for His glory, but rather to be something for his glory. Jesus did not say the Father is seeking missionaries, husbands, wives, secretaries, carpenters, etc. Whatever our roles in this life may be we need to see them as flowing out of our primary identity before God; that of a worshiper. We are all called first and foremost

to be worshipers. He redeemed us to worship Him, and as a redeemed people, we are called to be a blessing to the nations. Mission flows from worship, not vice-versa. John Piper expressed it this way, “Worship is the fuel and the goal of missions.”¹

2. When missions is central, worship is peripheral. Lack of sound Biblical teaching on both worship and missions on the part of our churches and theological institutions has brought us to a place where we are sending out hundreds of missionaries who have little or no theological and/or practical skill in planning

and leading corporate worship, especially in a cross-cultural setting. In addition, most church planting teams have literally no clue about the importance or process of establishing new believers in a lifestyle of worship. When missions is central, worship is not only peripheral corporately, but personally. One missionary admitted he got to a place within two years of being on the field where he was totally burned out. He felt that God was only interested in “using him to save souls.” He continued, “It was only after I learned that God loves me for who I am, not what I can do for Him that I

could minister to the millions of unreached people around me with a sense of balance.” Without a loving, intimate relationship with God experienced and expressed in and through worship, missionaries lack the fuel needed to stick it out.

3. When worship is peripheral, the people’s ability to worship is terminal. The resulting tragedy: predominantly Western worship forms in predominantly non-Western cultures. Yes, much of today’s music is influenced on a global scale by Western music, especially in the larger cities. And yes, we must recognize that musical and artistic forms are increasingly “mixed.” But, we are still doing far too little to assure that aspects of corporate worship other than the Word (i.e., music, arts, offering, etc.) are in the heart language of the

as the unique God-man and the Mediator between God and man.

In Hebrews 2:12 we find a brilliant summary of the role of Jesus Christ in leading our worship. According to the inspired writer, Christ is speaking to His Father (with the words of Psalm 22:22). And He says: Father, "I will proclaim Your name to my brethren" That is, the living, glorified One undertakes as High Priest and Mediator to reveal and teach the truth about God and His greatness to those who are His brethren (cf. Heb. 2:11).

The second half of Hebrews 2:12 shows us another remarkable truth: Jesus goes on to say to the Father, "in the midst of the congregation I will praise Your name." When we come to worship, *Jesus Christ is in our midst*, and, in a sense, is leading us in singing praises to the Father.

What an incredible truth! To begin with, it shows that the ministry of music in the church is not a pretty add-on or an enjoyable preliminary, but rather it is given an astounding importance by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, whose ministry it really is! And this verse also shows us that *Jesus Christ is the leader of our worship*. (Hebrews 8:2 describes as the "minister," in Greek the "liturgist" or worship leader in the *heavenly sanctuary*— as the priests were in the earthly sanctuary). That means that the worship leader, choir, or whoever leads in this part of the service is likewise *representing Christ*, in *His ministry* of leading the brethren's praise.

God has been pleased to accept an incredible diversity of expressions of worship over the centuries and around the world, not because of any inherent worthiness or excellence on

the part of any people, but because Jesus Christ (who is "the same yesterday and today and forever," Heb. 13: 8) is at the center, offering up a perfect sacrifice of praise in the midst of His people. Our worship is acceptable because we come *in Him* and *through Him*.

And so, as we consider the ever-broadening range of diverse worship expressions in our world, let us encourage them as appropriate and acceptable—in so far as they give a proper place to the Word of God, with the Holy Spirit blessing and giving power, with the congregation fully engaged and involved and with a recognition that we come to the Father led by and clothed with Christ who leads us in our praise. ☉

1. John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 174.

people. A terminal is a place where one can go "only so far." Our journey has begun, but in order to go any further we must have a vehicle (a plane, a boat, a bus, etc.) that will take us the next leg of our adventure. One "vehicle" that will help us to plant worshiping churches among every people is indigenous worship. Indigenous worship incorporates ethnic music, instruments and other artistic forms of communication. This allows people to worship God more freely and without the hindrance of forms that reinforce a "foreign god" stereotype. I believe that God will gain even greater glory among the nations as we develop and facilitate worship, both in it's lifestyle and corporate aspects, that truly reflects and relevantly speaks into the culture in which the church is being planted.

4. When worship is central, it is in the heart language of the people. It would seem that we need a new field of study and practice within missions. The term I prefer to use for this is "ethnodoxology." "Ethno," from the Greek word "ethne" meaning

cultures worship the true and living God." But just how relevant and important is something like ethnodoxology to our faith and practice? Imagine for a moment walking into church this Sunday and all the music you hear sounds strangely

knew getting a former missionary for our new pastor would be a problem!" Why! We would never tolerate such goings on! It begs the question, doesn't it... why do we offer our new brothers and sisters in Christ around the world a form of worship that we wouldn't endure in our own church for two minutes?! The Sovereign Lord says in Isaiah 61:11, "I will cause righteousness and praise to spring up among all nations." Today God is raising up an army of lead worshipers, ethnodoxologists, to go into all the world that lost people might "turn to God from idols to worship the living and true God"² and that worshiping churches might be planted among all peoples. ☉

...why do we offer our new brothers and sisters in Christ around the world a form of worship that we wouldn't endure in our own church for two minutes?!

"peoples" or "people groups" and "doxology," from the Greek word "doxos" meaning "glory or "praise." Ethnodoxology, then, is "the study of the worship of God among other cultures" or, more precisely, "the theological and practical study of how and why people of diverse

out of tune. The organ and keyboard you're used to have been replaced by bizarre, odd-sounding instruments. You ask your deacon friend what's going on. "The elders decided that all the music from now on would be in a Middle Eastern style, using Middle Eastern instruments." He adds, "I

1. John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993, 11.
2. 1 Thess 1:9, author's translation.