



## Missional Worship

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Before we can discuss missiology of worship we must first define what we mean by worship.

Worship is our response to God's initiation in an appropriate way that brings Him glory.

All worship ultimately starts with God. He always makes the first move of initiation (Luke 19:10, John 4:23, Rom 3:11 & 10:20). God loves, forgives, opens our minds, teaches, blesses, saves, provides and most of all sent his only Son to buy us back from sin and death with his own blood. Without God's initiation we could not even understand who he is. Depending on our response to that initiation we either worship or sin. If we see his initiation and do nothing we sin through apathy. If we see his initiation and respond inappropriately we sin through rebellion. However, if we see his initiation and respond in an appropriate way that brings God glory, then we come to a place of worship. The natural question then is, "what is an appropriate response?"

In the fourth chapter of John, at the end of his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus speaks to this issue. He says, "true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks (4:23)." The first thing to notice is that Jesus says that the Father is seeking worshipers. This is a significant paradigm shift for most of us. We want to believe that we know what is best for ourselves, that we choose God, that we recognize our need for him and make the first move of initiation. This is simply not the case. Jesus speaks to this through his repeated metaphor of himself as the shepherd and us as his sheep.

Jesus says he calls his sheep and they know his voice, he leaves the 99 righteous sheep to find the one who is lost and picks that sheep up and carries it home. We should not be confused as to the meaning of his metaphor; sheep are dumb animals that can do nothing for themselves without their shepherd. Paul goes as far as to say, "there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God (Rom. 3:11)." The beginning of acceptable worship is the realization that worship always starts with God's initiation in our lives.

Jesus says that the appropriate response of worship is in spirit and truth. To worship in truth is to worship in Christ. Jesus is the truth, the living word that spoke all creation into being. To worship in truth is to worship in the knowledge of Christ and the gospel. The gospel is not something that tells us about Christ, it is Christ. It is the supernatural redemptive work of God throughout time. It has its origin in the promise given to Adam & Eve that though the serpent will strike the heel of God's chosen one, the serpent will be crushed (Gen. 3:15). The gospel is the good news that, though we are enemies of God, He made a way through his own blood for us to have communion with him. God has sought us out and bought us back from the tyranny of sin and death that we could be with Him in a family of eternal praise as his adopted sons and daughters for all time. To worship in truth is to worship in light of all this. Everyone who claims the name of Christ is called to be a worshiper who knows who they are worshiping to the fullest measure they are capable of.

To worship in spirit is to worship God on His own terms. "God is Spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)." God is not a man; he is not human. Except for a brief 30 year period he does not have flesh. To do anything but worship him in spirit is to make God in our own image. Humans are spiritual beings encased in flesh. We are born into sin and thus our spirits are blind guides that lead us into all manner of depravity and unrighteousness. It is only through the regeneration of our spirit by God's Holy Spirit that we can see God and worship him. To worship the Father in Spirit is to worship him from a foreign land longing to go home. It is to acknowledge God's complete otherness from us and meet him in that place.

Everyone is a worshiper. Some worship created things, some worship an image of success, most worship themselves. What distinguishes the worshipers the Father seeks from the rest of the world (and in some cases the church) is they worship Him in the truth of who he is and do so in spirit.

To worship God with a missional perspective is to worship him from the perspective of a missionary. A good missionary comes from their "home" and puts their culture, customs and methodologies on the back burner in favor of an observing eye. They will study the culture, language, customs and practices of the people as a way of coming to know who they are, where they have come from, where they are going and what factors have influenced them along the way. A godly missionary always hold the gospel up as the overarching, superseding authority in all matters but acknowledges that the gospel must engage with culture and be contextualized into an authentic church family. This is not the compromise of syncretism that says, "whatever the culture says is right, we will say is right as well." Nor is it the entrenchment of sacred-ism that says, "everything about the culture is wrong so we will withdraw from the world and create our own culture that will be Christian." The work of the missionary lies in the painful realm of gray. It lies in wrestling with culture. It lies in the willingness to let go of what God may reveal as just a cultural thing while having the strength and courage to never let go of what the scripture says.

The quintessential example of the missional outlook that I am speaking of is illustrated in Paul's sermon at the meeting of the Areopagus at Mars Hill (Acts 17). Paul begins his address by complementing the members of the Areopagus on being "religious in every way" as demonstrated in their objects of worship. They even had an altar with the inscription: to an unknown god. He says (v. 23), "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." Paul was firmly planted in the world but totally other than it. He was knowledgeable of the people he was speaking to. He knew about their gods. He knew that they were so concerned about all the gods being appeased that they even had an altar to an "unknown god." Paul did not see things in terms of Christian and secular but saw many aspects of culture as a viable means of communicating the gospel. He used their idols and false gods to proclaim knowledge of the one true God and his son Jesus. Paul goes on to expound upon the sovereignty of God over all creation and how he orders the steps of all men. To reinforce his point he quotes from two different poets (v. 28), "For in him we live and move and have our being," and, "We are his offspring." The first quote is from the Cretan poet Epimenides; the second from Aratus from Paul's homeland Celicia. Paul was familiar with world and its art enough to speak in images familiar to those with whom he spoke. Paul was missionary and missionaries must know these things.

To speak of a missional worship is to speak of a truly appropriate response to God's initiation for a particular people. It is easy to acknowledge that an American response to God should differ from an African one. However, it is much more difficult for us to say that a worshipful response from a kid in the punk scene is just as legitimate as a response from a suburban doctor. Too often our worship is an exercise in cultural imperialism. We

develop a complete culture of worship that has no connection with the world people live in. This culture is carefully crafted with its own language, customs and rituals and then exported as a universal culture of worship. Over time these songs, prayers, and routines become how worship is done. This has tragic results in our gathered, corporate worship, which drastically affects the scattered worship of believers in the world.

I am not arguing for an a-historical, throw the baby out with the bathwater approach. What I am arguing for is a missional re-appropriation of elements of worship that takes into account the people who are being led into worship and the world they live in. The most appropriate response of worship for any congregation will always come from within that congregation. I believe most churches don't work to create indigenous forms of worship and liturgies for their people because nobody has told them they should. They have been told that certain things are just how worship is done. Sadly, much of this is driven by the financial profit of putting together whole church services to market in a prepackaged manner.

To have missional worship as a congregation is to perpetually seek a more appropriate response to how God is initiating among you. That response must be made in the truth of gospel revealed in Jesus Christ throughout the entirety of scripture. It must be made acknowledging that God is Spirit and has made our spirits alive to worship him in that realm of existence. That response should be made with both feet firmly planted in the world but always aware that this world is not our home and we are strangers here awaiting an eternal home. To discern this appropriate response is to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. It will be a place of constant tension. But where else is there to go?