

Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 36 · Number 3 · July 2012

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Lessons from Global Worship

Ron Man

KEYWORDS: *Missions, culture, biblical, ethnodoxology, church, glory, biblical authority*

THE GOAL OF THIS PAPER is to look at some of the developments in and perspectives on worship that can be observed in our present-day world. This is a huge and multi-faceted global phenomena but we can be encouraged that the body of Christ is magnificently varied and worships in an incredible variety of ways¹—to the glory and, one would assume, the *delight* of the Father.

I A Worship Reformation?

Whatever we call it, it is unquestionable that something big has been happening in worship in the evangelical church in the last fifty years. In 1961 A. W. Tozer wrote prophetically about what he deemed as the pitiful state of worship in evangelical churches:

1 For many fascinating examples, see Paul Neeley's blog *Global Christian Worship* (globalworship.tumblr.com); and the YouTube channel of *Heart Sounds International* (www.youtube.com/user/HSIOM).

Worship is the missing jewel in modern evangelicalism. We're organized, we work, we have our churches, we have our agendas, we have almost everything. But there is one thing that the churches, even the gospel churches, do not have: and that is the ability to worship. We are not cultivating the art of worship. It's the one shining gem that is lost to the modern church. And, I believe, we ought to search for this until we find it.²

If Tozer were still alive today, he would undoubtedly be amazed, and at least to some extent gratified, at the developments in worship that he in part helped to spur.³ Many of these

2 A. W. Tozer, *Worship: The Missing Jewel* (reprint: Christian Publications, 1996).

3 Several years ago, I twice had the opportunity, at two different schools, to have lunch with a well-known teacher of worship. When I asked these men how they first became attuned to the importance of worship, they amazingly had almost the identical answer (paraphrased): 'When I was attending Bible college [two different Bible colleges], A. W. Tozer came to campus and spoke on *worship*; and it opened up a whole new world to me.'

Ronald E. Man (MM, DMin, Dallas) is Pastor of Worship/Missionary in Residence at First Evangelical Church in Memphis, Tennessee USA, and serves as Director of Worship Resources International (www.worr.org). He is chairman of the working group for Europe Worship Link, and on the board of the Global Consultation on Music and Missions and the steering committee of the Biblical Worship Section of the Evangelical Theological Society. He is the author of *Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* (Wipf and Stock, 2006).

developments were focused in North America. In different corners of the evangelical world, Ronald Allen and Gordon Borror, Bruce Leafblad, Ralph Martin, Robert Rayburn, and above all Robert Webber took up the call, followed later by many others. In the evangelical world (and beyond) we have seen an explosion in the last fifty years of:

- Worship writings of all sorts: inspirational, practical, silly, and scholarly. John Witvliet of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (himself a major contributor in this area) surveyed some of the scholarly contributions among evangelicals in a paper at the 2008 meeting of this group.⁴ Worship scholars such as the late Robert Webber and now Reggie Kidd have been regular contributors to *Worship Leader* magazine. And evangelical leaders such as John Piper, John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul and Bryan Chapell have weighed in on worship in print as well.
- Worship music and recordings. A vast array of new songs and styles; but also efforts to retain, revive and sometimes recast old hymns.
- Worship seminars and conferences. Again, of all sorts.
- Worship courses and degree programs on all levels of higher

education; e.g., there are presently at least twenty master's degree programs in seminaries and Christian universities with some sort of emphasis on worship.

- Worship scholarship, such as that encouraged by the new Biblical Worship Section of the Evangelical Theological Society; its stated aim is 'to encourage and model academic study that supports renewal and reform in the worship of evangelical churches and promotes education about worship in evangelical institutions'.
- Worship networks: in recent years the Calvin Institute has hosted two colloquia for evangelical worship theologians (with about 25 and 35 in attendance, respectively). And the Biblical Worship Section of ETS also has served to network those who participate in these sessions, and also others as the presented papers are posted online (etsworship.wordpress.com).
- And, of course, the so-called worship wars within individual churches and denominations. Every reformation has its casualties.

James White and Robb Redman⁵ among others have chronicled some of these developments.

⁴ John D. Witvliet, 'Grounding Corporate Worship in Scriptural Wisdom: Prospects of Recent Evangelical Scholarship', Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, 2008. (etsworship.wordpress.com All the papers from the 2007-2010 sessions are available on this website).

⁵ James F. White, *Christian Worship in North America: A Retrospective: 1955-1995* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997; reprint: Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2007), especially chapter 9: 'The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church'; Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening: Singing a New Song in the Postmodern Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

II Worldwide Worship

Developments in evangelical worship awareness and focus have not been limited to North America or the English-speaking world.⁶ Many of the same advances, and more than a few of the same problems, can be observed around the world as well.

- Worship writings worldwide. Except for Canada and the U.K., most of the production of worship books in other countries has consisted of works translated from the English and published abroad. Thankfully, David Peterson's *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* has found its way into French, Spanish, Romanian, Russian and Bulgarian.
- Worship music and recordings worldwide. Much of this material is, in fact, directly or stylistically imported from the U.S. and the U.K., and now Australia as well; (Hillsong), often sung in English, though also translated. One consequence of modern forms of communication is the fact that, whether we like it or not, western contemporary music is now part of the culture and the 'heart music' of young people all over the world. Church leaders and missionaries must face this reality head-on in their work, even while encouraging indigenous forms of art and worship.
- Worship seminars and conferences worldwide. In the last two years I have personally taught at

three regional or national worship and church music consultations in vastly different parts of the world: the *Global Consultation on Music in Missions* in Singapore (July 2010) (a global event but with a decided Asian flavour); the *International Christian Music Summit* in Riga, Latvia (January 2011), drawing participants from Eastern Europe and nations of the former Soviet Union; and the *National Consultation on Church Music and Worship* in Pakistan (a strongly Muslim country!) (February 2011), given in two cities and drawing participants from across the country. (I was gratified that the organizers of these three events all saw the importance of solid biblical foundations, even while celebrating culturally rich and varied expressions of worship; hence the role I was able to play in these conferences, teaching on biblical foundations.) These are just a few examples of the kinds of things, unimaginable fifty years ago, now happening in so many different parts of the world.

- Worship courses and programs. While degree programs in worship are still mainly limited to the English-speaking world, there is a remarkable amount of teaching in this area going on around the world. This writer alone has had the opportunity to give courses and/or seminars on worship in over 30 countries in the past eleven years, and many others have been similarly involved in other countries as well.
- Worship scholarship. Again, this

⁶ See wor.org/worldwide_worship.php for a list and links of a number of different worship ministries in various parts of the world.

area is in its infancy, at least in the evangelical world. Two collections of essays from an international array of authors have made a contribution in this area.⁷

- Worship networks. Two examples from this author's personal involvement are: the *Europe Worship Link* (www.europeworshiplink.com), a network of worship leaders and teachers from across Europe, which sponsors gatherings for mutual encouragement and resourcing; and the *Eurasian Worship Alliance*, a network of missionaries involved in worship-related ministries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, which stays in contact to communicate, coordinate and cooperate in this region of common interest. There are other networks, most operating on a national level, such as the *Music and Worship Foundation* in the UK (mwf.org.uk).
- Worship wars. Sadly, these have emerged as well, though perhaps not with the frequency or magnitude of such skirmishes in comfortable western churches, where we seem to have no weightier issues facing us. In places where the church is undergoing severe privation or persecution, there is little attention given to the kinds of style and music debates that sap so much energy in North

America particularly. Yet it is remarkable how consistently many of the issues show themselves in far-flung parts of the world as well. Generational issues are very much at the forefront almost everywhere, with the concomitant discussions about styles, instrumentation, etc.⁸

III Worship and Missions: The Rediscovered Relationship

The nation of Israel was called forth to be a unique worshipping people of the one true God. In Isaiah 43:21 it is designated as 'the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise'. In Exodus Moses repeatedly commands Pharaoh on behalf of God to 'let my people go, that they might worship [or 'serve'] me in the wilderness' (Ex. 7:16; 8:1,20; 9:1,13; 10:3, cf. also 3:12,18; 5:1,3; 8:8,27; 10:7,8-9,25-26).

Yet, as Abraham's call in Genesis 12:1-2 makes clear, God's intention was always to bless the entire world and bring them under his gracious rule (though the nation of Israel too often forgot this intended outward-looking aspect of their privileged position as the special people of God). The calling of all peoples to praise the one true God is a prominent theme in the Scriptures, especially in the book of Psalms. For example, in Psalm 67 (ESV) we read:

May God be gracious to us and
bless us and make his face to
shine upon us,

⁷ Donald A. Carson, editor, *Worship: Adoration and Action* (reprint: Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2002); Charles E. Farhadian, editor, *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007).

⁸ By far the most common question posed to me when I am teaching overseas has to do with whether a particular style or type of music is appropriate for Christian worship.

that your way may be known on
earth,
your saving power among all
nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!
Let the nations be glad and sing
for joy,
for you judge the peoples with
equity and guide the nations
upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!

The Psalmist here obviously understands the Abrahamic Covenant, and sees God's blessings on Israel as a conduit for the blessing of all nations. And that blessing finds its focus and fulfilment in the praises and joyful songs of 'all the peoples'.

John Piper forcefully addressed the issue of worship's relationship to missions in his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, as will be seen below. The title itself is taken from Psalm 67, and the book itself (especially the first chapter on missions and worship) reflects the Psalmist's concerns. But Piper was not the first in modern times to reemphasize this biblical theme. At InterVarsity's triennial Urbana conference in 1976, Edmund Clowney said in his keynote address:

It is my privilege to announce our international anthem... it is the doxology of the new mankind. One day the redeemed from every tribe, tongue, people and nation will sing the song of Moses and the Lamb on the other shore of the sea of fire (Rev. 15:2-3). But today God calls us to sing it here at Urbana: 'Declare his glory among the nations, his wonders among all the peoples'

(Ps: 96:3).

Praise his name, we are called to doxological evangelism: Salvation is of the Lord! Let that song die and we have nothing to sing to the nations. If we do not praise his name, we do not preach the gospel.⁹

Then at Urbana in 1981 Eric Alexander would take up the same theme, saying:

Worship and mission are so bound together in the economy of God that you really cannot have one without the other. No one can truly worship God and at the same time have an apparently total indifference to whether anyone else is worshiping him or not. True worship and true mission always go together. The glory of God is the only ultimate missionary motive.¹⁰

And on another occasion, Alexander in a sermon made the following startling statement:

The ultimate missionary compulsion is not simply that there are people who are dying without knowing Christ, nor is it that God has given us the Great Commission to go out into the world; it is that there are areas of the world, whether here or to the ends of the earth, where God is being robbed of his glory.¹¹

In 1993 Piper published *Let the Na-*

⁹ Edmund C. Clowney, 'Declare His Glory among the Nations' (Urbana, 1976). worr.org/images/File/Clowney%20Urbana%201976.pdf

¹⁰ Eric J. Alexander, 'Mission and Vision' (Urbana, 1981). [worr.org/images/File/Alexander Mission and Vision\(1\).pdf](http://worr.org/images/File/Alexander Mission and Vision(1).pdf)

¹¹ Eric J. Alexander, 'Worship God!' (unpublished sermon).

tions *Be Glad*, which he famously began with the lines:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their face before the throne of God, missions will be no more. Missions is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.¹²

Piper goes on to affirm that worship is the goal of missions:

In missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God.¹³

and also the fuel of missions:

Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish.¹⁴

These emphases have led to an historic rediscovery of the biblical relationship between worship and missions. Some of the effects have been:

- A new professional field devoted to 'the study of how and why people of diverse cultures glorify the true and living God', designated with the newly-coined term *ethnodoxology*. (*Ethnomusicology* has been around much longer, but it is a secular as well as a religious discipline.)
- A new breed of Christian mis-

sionary, assisting people groups in developing indigenous expressions of Christian worship that are reflective of and meaningful in that local culture (and often identifying themselves now as 'ethnodoxologists'). *Wycliffe Bible Translators*¹⁵ and its sister organization, *SIL International*, have led the way in this area; as well as deploying people for these pursuits, they also provide advanced training to prepare what they call 'Arts Consultants' through the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics.¹⁶

- Many involved in various aspects of this field have found mutual encouragement, resourcing and cooperation through a fellowship called the *International Council of Ethnodoxologists* (www.worldofworship.org). This from Robin Harris, President of ICE: 'ICE has close to 250 associates from (or in) over 70 countries on six continents. We are connected to over a hundred organizations: schools, seminaries, mission agencies, non-profits, and churches. Our associates from around the world are primarily

¹² John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (3rd edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), p. 15.

¹³ Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*, 35.

¹⁴ Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*, 36.

¹⁵ Wycliffe found that where its missionaries got their newly translated Scriptures sung in indigenous music forms, the churches grew rapidly; where this did not happen, the churches grew more slowly.

¹⁶ Courses offered include: Introduction to Language Structure, Language and Society, Second Language and Culture Acquisition, Cultural Anthropology, Audio and Video Techniques for Fieldworkers, Expressive Form Analysis, Research Methods for Performing Arts, Applied Arts.

teachers, students, missionaries and mission leaders, artists of all stripes, arts advocates, as well as pastoral staff and worship leaders from a broad spectrum of Christian denominations.’

- A renewed recognition on the part of missions organizations of the centrality of worship and the glory of God in the work of world evangelization. *Wycliffe Bible Translators*, for example, states as the first of its *Core Values*:

The Glory of God among the Nations. Our motive for Bible translation is that all the peoples of the earth would have the opportunity to pursue God and his glory.¹⁷

Other mission organizations are likewise emphasizing the priority of worship as both the goal and the fuel of their missions endeavours; *Crossworld*, for example, has used as its tagline on its website: ‘we worship—we love—we go’.

IV Worship and Culture

The issue of culture, variously defined as ‘the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group’¹⁸ to simply ‘the way things are done’,¹⁹ cannot be ignored (or escaped from) by the church. Worship breathes the cultural air in which it is practised. Aidan Kavanaugh has written that Christian worship ‘swims in

creation as a fish swims in water’.²⁰ Culture pervades how we think and act, regardless of whether we are aware of it or not.

1 A Worldwide Debate

As mentioned above, tensions about worship forms and styles arise in most cultures. Music and other cultural forms evoke strong emotions in most societies, and so the issue is not a negligible one.

Neither is it a new one. In the early church there was often a wide diversity of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds in one congregation (ethnic Jews, Greeks, Romans, ‘barbarians’; freemen and slaves (and slave owners). Certainly that diversity brought also a wide range of preferences and opinions about music and other worship elements. The congregation had no choice but to work through these issues; there was no option for people to switch to another church down the street with a different worship style; there was ‘the church at Ephesus,’ or ‘the church at Corinth’. There *was* no Second Church! With only one church option, believers were forced to learn to live and work together for their common goal of glorifying God.

Church history is likewise full of debates relative to worship forms and practices: What kind of music to use? Who should do the singing? Should the singing be in unison or parts? What kinds of harmonies are appropriate? What texts should or should not be sung? Should instruments be used

¹⁷ See www.wycliffe.org.

¹⁸ www.dictionary.com.

¹⁹ Author unknown.

²⁰ Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992), 4.

at all? And if so, which ones? All of these questions, and many more, have been hotly debated in churches down through the centuries; and new such areas for debate arise all the time.

2 The Bottom Line

Underlying these common issues that have surfaced in the midst of the global worship developments we have been discussing, and that are perennial issues of debate everywhere and in every age, is one basic question: How do we balance the need for biblical fidelity with the need for cultural sensitivity and relevance in our worship? Other ways of framing the question include: How do we bridge the historical and practical gap between the Scriptural mandates and our cultural context? How can our worship be 'in' the world but not 'of' the world? Where do worship and culture intersect?

I have encountered a Christian group that wanted to be deliberately *unbiblical* in its approach to worship. But just what does it mean to be *biblical*, and how is that to be played out in a given cultural context?

3 The Challenges

There are two primary issues that make the answers to these questions so difficult in all cultures.

a) The Silence of the New Testament

Every grounded and mature believer would maintain that the Scriptures must guide us as our final and supreme authority in understanding and shaping our worship. After all, worship is about God, and the Scriptures are

where he has revealed to us his nature and ways; worship is likewise for God, and the Scriptures are where he tells us what he expects of us creatures. People change; times change; cultures change; only in the pages of Scripture can we hope to find an unchanging standard for our worship. With all the debates about worship forms, styles and practices which continue to rage today in many places, the church of Jesus Christ desperately needs a unifying understanding of the unchanging, non-negotiable foundations of worship—and we must turn to the Scriptures for this purpose.

Yet even with this commitment to the Scriptures as our guide for worship, we immediately run into a problem when we go to the New Testament for models and guidelines for congregational worship. That problem has been summarized by John Piper as the 'stunning indifference' of the New Testament writers to issues of form and practice of corporate worship.²¹ We search the pages of the New Testament in vain for much in the way of specifics, much less structures or liturgies. Even in the epistles, where we might reasonably expect Paul and the other writers to address these issues as they write to guide and encourage brand new churches, we find frustratingly little.

We are left with a crucial question: Just what is it in the Bible that is supposed to govern and determine our worship? There are on-going hermeneutical debates as to how and to what extent the Old Testament, the New Testament, and early church history should inform and shape our present

²¹ John Piper, 'In Spirit and Truth' (sermon).

day understanding and practice of worship.²² But there is widespread agreement that the pages of the New Testament itself give little in the way of specific directions. Piper observes:

In the New Testament, all the focus is on the reality of the glory of Christ, not the shadow and copy of religious objects and forms. It is stunning how indifferent the New Testament is to such things: there is no authorization in the New Testament for worship buildings, or worship dress, or worship times, or worship music, or worship liturgy or worship size or thirty-five-minute sermons, or Advent poems or choirs or instruments or candles... . *Almost every worship tradition we have is culturally shaped rather than Biblically commanded.*²³

This last statement is a remarkable observation, and one with which Dan Block concurs:

In large measure, the reason many churches today are splitting over forms of communal worship may be found in the relative paucity of direct guidance that the New Testament provides. We want to be New Testament churches. The only trouble is ... the New Testament doesn't give us much specific instruction on how to do church, that is, the cultic gathering. Nowhere does the New Testament tell us to build churches,

to meet on Sundays, to have morning worship services, to open with a song and a prayer, to have a long sermon, and then to close with a benediction.²⁴

We may well ask, why did the Lord leave things so open by not stipulating in detail how corporate worship in the church should be practised? Piper makes an intriguing suggestion. He points out that Old Testament system was a 'Come and See' religion. Worship was centralized in Jerusalem, and worshipers had to come there, and at prescribed times. Even those from the surrounding nations were invited, but they had to come through Israel and to Jerusalem (and become Jews) in order to worship the one true God. Because worship under this system was localized geographically and temporally, the Old Testament gives extremely detailed and exacting prescriptions of how that worship was to be carried out. Exodus and Leviticus are full of minute detail concerning how public worship was to be practised.

In the New Testament, however, Piper points out, we have the opposite situation: we have a 'Go and Tell' system. We are to take the gospel to every nation, into every culture. And that may well be the reason why the New Testament does not spell out more in the way of specific worship practices: so that worship can be inflected in meaningful ways in each culture where the gospel takes root.²⁵

²² See Michael Farley's paper from the 2007 ETS Biblical Worship Section event, as well as the 2010 papers, at etsworship.wordpress.com.

²³ John Piper, 'Our High Priest is The Son of God Perfect Forever' (sermon). [italics mine]

²⁴ Daniel I. Block, 'The Joy of Worship: The Mosaic Invitation to the Presence of God' (Deuteronomy 12:1-14), audio message. (Published also in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 2005.)

²⁵ John Piper, 'Our High Priest'.

It is a reasonable (though not unanimous) assumption that the virtual silence of the New Testament writers on matters of form and style for worship means that the Lord intends us to have considerable latitude and flexibility in these areas—from culture to culture, perhaps even from church to church. Yet our worship services still need to look like something—so how are we to make choices?

b) People Are Different

When it comes to making choices as to the forms and elements of worship, we immediately run into another difficulty. Music and the other arts are profound and powerful expressions; yet often there are wide divergences of opinion among people between and even within cultures as to their use in Christian worship, as to what is appropriate, meaningful and helpful.

The late Tom Avery, a pioneer ethnomusicologist with Wycliffe Bible Translators, drew the following insights from his field work and applied them to issues of worship music in our churches:

- It is common for people to feel very strongly about the music with which they identify, and to find the music with which they do not identify to be extremely distasteful.
- We live in a society where different generations may and often do have different musical cultures. (This is caused by the rapid rate of culture change experienced by society, probably unprecedented in the history of the world.)
- We have people in the same churches who partake of radically different musical cultures.

- Music is NOT a universal language.²⁶

This last point is a crucial one: not only does music sound different in different cultures, and indeed to different generations; but it can communicate widely varying things and elicit a wide array of different responses. Robin Harris expounded this point further in a recent *Worship Leader* article.²⁷

c) Caution

Given the silence of the New Testament, and the resultant freedom of expression that that silence seems to allow for, we need to be very careful about assuming that we have discovered the one right, God-honouring way to do worship (and even more careful about condemning those who do it differently). Reggie Kidd reminds us that

every group brings its own voice, but no group brings the official voice. One Voice sings above them all, and this Voice sings in all their voices, excluding none. His singular voice is distributed among a plurality of people. Just because there are so many dimensions to his own being, the multiplicity of their voices amplifies his song.²⁸

²⁶ Tom Avery, 'Worship Wars and Ethnomusicology' (Powerpoint presentation). worr.org/images/File/Worship%20Wars%20and%20Ethnomusicology%2020.ppt

²⁷ Robin Harris, 'The Great Misconception: Why Music Is Not a Universal language', *Worship Leader* (November-December 2009). [worr.org/images/File/Worship%20Leader%20-All%20\(compressed\).pdf](http://worr.org/images/File/Worship%20Leader%20-All%20(compressed).pdf)

²⁸ Reggie Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 2005), 126.

There is One Voice, that of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ, leading and empowering the praises in thousands of local expressions of worship among the worldwide people of God.²⁹

When the Bible is explicit in its directives, we need to be forthright and unbending; when the Bible is not explicit, we need to be open-minded. We should still look to the Scriptures for guidance (as we will consider below); but we also need to be careful to differentiate between what is truly biblical and therefore non-negotiable; and what is cultural (or culturally shaped), and therefore negotiable. That is not an easy task; but it is worth the effort.

3 Two Tools

Two tools have proven helpful in navigating these treacherous waters.

a) The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture³⁰

This statement was released by the *World Lutheran Federation* in 1996, and has provided many with a way to get a hold on the swirling issues surrounding the interface of worship and culture—both locally and globally. It summarizes its findings thus:

Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways:

First, it is **transcultural**, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture.

Second, it is **contextual**, varying according to the local situation.

Third, it is **counter-cultural**, challenging what is contrary to the gospel in a given culture.

Fourth, it is **cross-cultural**, making possible sharing between different local cultures.

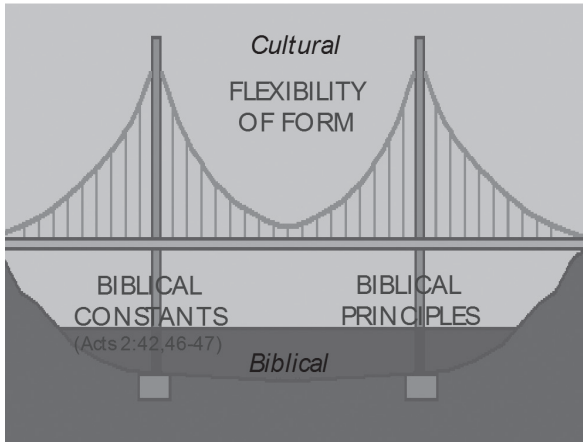
The *transcultural* nature of worship means that there are aspects of worship that do not (and should not) change from culture to culture. Thus many, including this author, have had the opportunity to teach on worship in cultures very distant and different from their own. There are biblical elements and principles of worship that, precisely because they are *biblical*, transcend culture and can be taught by someone from another culture.

But we do not want to be so totally transcultural that we ignore the cultural context in which we live (too many missionaries did that in the past and imported western ways of doing church, including worship). There are *contextual* elements that are appropriate to the particular culture in which the worship occurs. We have to be careful (regardless of where we come down on some of the hermeneutical questions) not to try to prescribe exactly how believers in another culture should practise worship—because we are not *from* that culture. Again, discernment is needed between what is truly biblical and what is an appropriately variable cultural expression—timeless truths and timely outworkings!

Contextualizing worship does not, however, mean that ‘anything goes’; worship should also be *counter-cultural* and reject elements of the culture that are deemed inappropriate for Christian worship. (Of course, debates continue about just where those lines should be drawn.)

²⁹ See also my book *Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

³⁰ The entire document may be accessed at www.worship.ca/docs/lwf_ns.html.



And, more now than ever (because of globalization and modern communications), we have the opportunity to learn of and draw from the wonderful diversity of the larger body of Christ—in our own communities and across the world—and to grow in incorporating *cross-cultural* elements into our local celebrations.

The trick, of course, is that all of these four characteristics are (or should be) going on *at the same time*. The *Nairobi Statement* provides a helpful grid for looking at the practice of worship in our churches and considering how we can learn and grow in a fuller understanding and expression of worship; for different churches will be stronger in certain of these characteristics than in others.

b) The Bridge

Another tool for communicating the interrelationship of biblical and cultural aspects of worship is an illustration based on a *single-suspension bridge* (see picture above). This illustration applies equally to, and has been ef-

fectively used in, all sorts of different cultural contexts.

A single-suspension bridge (in this layman's understanding) is supported by two sturdy towers, which are embedded deeply and firmly in the earth so as to be immovable and to give stability to the entire structure. However, a considerable amount of the weight of the bridge is also borne by the suspension span, the cable stretched between the towers; this cable however, unlike the towers, has built flexibility so that it can adjust to winds, changes of the temperature, and the like.

The Two Towers: A Biblical Framework

Such a bridge can serve to illustrate the relationship between the Bible and culture when it comes to worship matters. The towers represent a sturdy, immovable framework of biblical truth. In spite of the New Testament's silence on matters of form, the Bible certainly gives some guidelines for worship; it is not 'anything goes'. As the picture suggests, the Bible speaks to some necessary, non-negotiable elements

of Christian worship ('Biblical Constants');³¹ and there are plentiful 'Biblical Principles' from both Testaments which can and should inform our worship practices.³²

The Suspension Cable: Cultural Latitude

However, as already noted, there is a wide range of worship decisions that are not specifically addressed in Scripture; and principles by definition must be applied in specific situations. This means that, from church to church, from culture to culture, and indeed from age to age, biblical worship may well (and indeed does) look very different as it is fleshed out in particular contexts. The suspension cable or span, with its built-in elasticity and flexibility, represents the freedom that the New Testament seems to allow for wise and prudent application of culturally meaningful expressions (always within the biblical parameters). The 'heart language of the people' is to be considered when making decisions about forms, styles, music and other artistic expressions of faith.

Below are some fascinating statements from church history that illustrate how different groups have acknowledged the need and allowed for cultural accommodation in worship practices:

Pope Gregory I sent Augustine of

Canterbury to England as a missionary about A.D. 596 with this advice: 'It seems to me that you should carefully select for the English Church, which is still new to the faith and developing as a distinct community, whatever can best please Almighty God, whether you discover it in the Roman Church, or among the Gauls, or anywhere else... . From each individual church, therefore, choose whatever is holy, whatever is awe-inspiring, whatever is right; then arrange what you have collected as if in a little bouquet according to the English disposition and thus establish them as custom.' (James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 44)

And to the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. (*Augsburg Confession* [Lutheran, 1530], Article 7)

The Master ... did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended on the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages)... . Because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices

³¹ What actually belongs under this classification will vary according to the hermeneutical grid one applies to a biblical understanding of Christian worship.

³² A list of such principles is suggested in my article 'Biblical Principles of Worship' (online at worr.org/by_ron_man.php); see also the Calvin Institute's 'Ten Core Convictions' at worship.calvin.edu/ten.

and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe. (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 10, 30)

Article 34—Of the Traditions of the Church

It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word.... Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church, ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying. (*Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* [Church of England, 1563])

We certainly can see the application of this principle of Cultural Latitude (consciously or not) in the vast array of worship expressions seen down through the history of the Christian Church, and in churches around the world today. There have been, and are, an enormous variety in terms of architecture, atmosphere, form, structure, style, dress, music, liturgy, etc. As discussed earlier, recent developments in missions have given more weight to the importance of helping people groups to develop their own indigenous forms of worship expression, rather than simply borrowing and translating songs and other practices from the West (as was the practice for too long in many church planting contexts).

The virtual silence of the New Testament as to the specifics of congregation worship practice seems to allow for local churches, as the fundamental unit of the body of Christ on earth, to have considerable autonomy and freedom as individual congregations in working out the issues involving the balance of biblical constants and biblical flexibility in the worship of that church. That does not mean that it is an easy task, however—as recent history has amply demonstrated. The so-called 'worship wars' are symptomatic of the kind of danger into which freedom of this sort can cast us; and we might indeed be left wishing that Paul had just prescribed a set liturgy for all time and left it at that! God obviously wants his people to apply biblical wisdom and discernment in this, as well as in many other areas where he has chosen not to spell everything out for us.

It will take several things for a local church to successfully navigate these treacherous worship waters, among them:

- *Leadership.* The pastor and the elders/deacons/board must study worship in the Bible, and study their people as well, and seek prayerful conclusions.
- *Communication.* The careful solicitation of points of view from members of the congregation, while not the last word on worship decisions that must be made by the leadership, is an important step in leading the people as shepherds.
- *Teaching.* The pastor and other leaders must promote a biblical understanding of worship in the public teaching ministry of the Church. And if any kind of change

in worship is to be undertaken in the church, it is absolutely essential that the people are told the *why*, not just the *what*, of the change.

- *Principle-based decisions.* This relates to the second tower of the bridge illustration: just because the Bible does not give a lot of specifics about worship services does not mean that we have no biblical guidance at all. Clear biblical principles can be discerned, and this gives hope for agreement on a foundational biblical level within, and even among, churches. But principles by definition must be applied, and that is where the leaders must devote prayer for wisdom and balance in making application of the principles to their particular local church situation. Also, by definition principles may be applied *differently* by different people and in different situations; so we must learn to give grace to others in the church who would prefer a different application, and to other churches which apply principles differently to their situation.
- *'Semper reformanda.'* This Latin phrase means 'always reforming' and comes to us out of the Reformation; it expresses the importance of regularly and repeatedly subjecting our worship and other practices to the scrutiny of the Scriptures. Culture and traditions change; the Scriptures do not. A church's traditions should not be ignored when considering worship issues in that church; but neither should they be allowed to assume the level of au-

thority that is appropriate only to the Scriptures. As someone has said, 'Tradition is a wonderful servant, but a terrible master'.

V Global Worship: Lessons, Cautions and Blessings

Turning back to the *Nairobi Statement* once more, we can use its grid to guide us in some concluding applicational perspectives.

- *Culture matters (Contextual Worship).* We are as believers to be 'in', though not 'of', the world. Jesus was very conversant in the culture in which he lived during his earthly ministry: sometimes he conformed to it; sometimes he challenged it (when it went against God's ways); sometimes he outright contradicted it. But he was never unaware of it. Culture is not our enemy; it is in a sense 'the air we breathe', so we cannot ignore it. Christian worship 'is permeated with the sights and sounds and smells, the tastes and touch of our material world, and in this way it offers not a disembodied message of escape but rather an encompassing experience of a world redeemed and reconciled to God'.³³

Cultural diversity in worship is thus inevitable, and also positive. As John Piper has expressed:

The frightening freedom of worship in the New Testament is a

³³ John H. Erickson and Eileen W. Lindner, 'Worship and Prayer in Ecumenical Formation,' *Theological Education* Vol. 34, Supplement (1997): 23.

missionary mandate. We must not lock this gospel treasure in any cultural strait-jacket. Rather let us find the place, the time, the dress, the forms, the music that kindles and carries a passion for the supremacy of God in all things.³⁴

- *Scripture matters more (Transcultural Worship)*. Framing and controlling and protecting and guiding and correcting and enriching our worship practices must be a solid foundation of biblical truth and rigorous application of biblical principles of worship. Worship is, after all, about God and for God—and we must praise him ‘according to his excellent greatness’, as the Psalmist enjoins us (150:2). We must seek to ‘let the Word of Christ dwell richly among’ us (Colossians 3:16), by letting it infuse and regulate our worship, and find expression throughout the service in many different ways: most evangelical services need more of the Word read and sung and prayed and declared (this is a *worldwide* need). James F. White has incisively warned thus:

If we really believe, as we profess, that scripture is central to the Christian life, then it ought also to be central in our worship life. That Sunday bulletin is an important statement of faith. If the bulletin makes it clear that scripture is an important part of Christian worship, then

we can be sure people will get the message that the Bible is crucial in shaping their lives as Christians. But, when the role of scripture in worship is negligible, when scripture is used only to launch a sermon, what is communicated is that the Bible is marginal in Christian life, too. The use we make or fail to make of scripture in our worship says far more about Christian discipleship than we may realize.³⁵

- *We must rigorously differentiate between biblical injunctions and cultural inflections (Transcultural/Contextual distinction)*. We must always be aware of our Pharisaic tendency towards ‘teaching as doctrines the precepts of men’ (Matthew 15:9), which in this passage Jesus himself says leads to ‘vain’ worship. Many (if not most) worship debates and disagreements arise from not clearly discerning the difference here. When God has not spoken unequivocally to a subject, we must be very careful about thinking we have unerringly discerned his thinking. Tradition is not our enemy, but must always be held up to scrutiny in light of God’s Word, our only unchanging standard for worship and life.
- *We must discern our culture wisely and biblically (Counter-Cultural Worship)*. All that glitters is not gold. Missionaries are often faced with helping newly-reached peo-

34 John Piper, ‘Our High Priest is The Son of God Perfect Forever’ (sermon).

35 James F. White, ‘Making Our Worship More Biblical’, *Perkins Journal* 34.1 (Fall 1980): 38.

ples to determine what from the culture can be profitably reflected in their worship, and what should be rejected because it would distract or offend because of inseparable associations that are dishonouring to God and his truth; that challenge constantly faces us as well. Ronald Byars has wisely stated:

The gospel ought never to be entirely at home in any culture. If gospel and culture fit together as easily as hand-in-glove, then the likelihood is that the gospel has capitulated to the values of the culture... There must always be some tension between gospel and culture. The trick is to tune that tension just right, so that gospel and church can play a transforming role in its host culture. The gospel doesn't carry with it a culture of its own. It must always find its place in the culture of the time and place. Nevertheless, it always questions the local culture and holds it accountable before the cross.³⁶

- *We should practise local worship with a global mind set (Cross-Cultural Worship).* God is not a local deity, and his church is a vast mosaic of people from many tribes, and tongues, and people, and nations.³⁷ Our worship should not

be monochrome and provincial.

- *We must focus above all on what truly pleases God in worship.*

First and foremost, we must rest in the fact that our worship is acceptable and pleasing to the Father because it is gathered up and perfected and offered up by his Son, our Worship Leader and High Priest, with whom the Father is *always* pleased. James Torrance reminds us that 'there is only one way to come to the Father, namely, through Christ in the communion of the Spirit, ... whatever outward form our worship may take'.³⁸

And, finally, we must always remember that 'man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7). Both Testaments make abundantly clear that God is much more concerned with our hearts than with the form of our worship.³⁹ God in his grace has provided a perfect worship for us to present to the Father in and through Jesus Christ; and we are to attune our hearts to our Saviour's, gratefully and humbly offering our worship through him as an appropriate 'Amen' to God's 'Yes' to us in Christ—for his glory (2 Corinthians 1:20).

³⁶ Ronald P. Byars, *Christian Worship: Glorifying and Enjoying God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 110.

³⁷ Some practical first steps in this direction are offered in my article 'Global Worship: What in the World Can I Do about It?' *Worship Leader*, November-December 2009, 82.

worr.org/images/File/Worship%20Leader%20-All%20(compressed).pdf

³⁸ James B. Torrance, 'Christ in Our Place', in *A Passion for Christ* (Lenoir, North Carolina: PLC Publications, 1999), 37.

³⁹ For more on this theme, see my *Worship Notes* 1.11 (November 2006). worr.org/images/File/1-11HEART.pdf