

Worship and Witness

John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, has written about the significance of the psalms for Christian worship. He says, “The Psalms speak of both social justice and personal transformation; they embody hand-clapping exuberance and profound introspection; they express the prayers of both the exalted and the lowly; they are fully alive in the present, but always point to the future on the basis of the past; they highlight both the extravagance of grace and the joy of faithful obedience; they express a restless yearning for change and a profound gratitude for the inheritance of faith; they protest ritualism but embody the richest expression of ritual prayer.”

In his book *Church Morph*, Eddie Gibbs writes that the psalms are not only comprehensive in their themes but are also extensive in the global scope of their vision. They see beyond the present worshiping community, calling upon the nations – and the whole of creation – to join them in worship. Many of the calls to worship in the psalms “ring with delight: trees clap their hands; whales and hippos sing praise, in which all creation is caught up in a symphony of shalom to God.”

The psalms further demonstrate the close tie between worship and witness, for the one flows naturally and inevitably into the other. Witness is represented as the overflow of our worship.

“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name, proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.” (Psalm 96:1-5)

It is ironic that there is such a strong awareness of “the nations” in many of the psalms even as this awareness is sadly lacking in much of our contemporary music. This significant omission may represent a loss of missional nerve and commitment in the post-colonial western world. It is the churches of the Global South that have taken up the challenge of world evangelization in our day with the greatest enthusiasm.

Introspective, self-improvement Christianity falls far short of the intention of God for his creation. If our worship begins and ends with us, then it has been reduced to the level of spiritual self-indulgence. True worship draws us near to the heart of God and his love, who so loved the world that he gave his only son for its salvation (John 3:16). Worship not only experiences the glory of God, but does not rest until that glory fills the whole earth as the peoples of the world submit to his Lordship. “The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice” (Psalm 97:1)

Worship is the heartbeat of mission. Congregations need to be active participants, rather than passive consumers. Theologically, creativity in worship arises from the conviction that humans are made in the image of God and are thereby bestowed with a creative capacity to glorify their Creator in worship by offering back to God the fruits of a rich diversity of creative expression. The spotlight in congregational worship must not be

directed toward a few gifted individuals, such that the bulk of the congregation is marginalized and left in the dark. Ultimately, attention is directed toward God, rather than being celebrity-focused.

At their best, Alternative Worship services strike a chord with the surrounding community, because they are indigenous in style and address the current issues that resonate with the community. Offering fresh perspective and enabling people to see themselves more clearly, the challenges to their faith journey are honestly depicted and biblically informed in the context of worship, thereby providing new insights, stimulating faith, and injecting hope. The heart of worship must never be separated from the legs of mission.

In the midst of our current turbulence, we must keep in mind some fundamental convictions:

1. We must engage with the big picture that unfolds in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, recording a multifaceted, comprehensive account of God's redemptive engagement with humankind. We are all prone to edit the story, whether from a conservative or liberal standpoint, but we should take care not to let the edited version be the final word.
2. We must celebrate God's creation and ensure that we are responsible stewards.
3. We must seek to have hearts that are filled with the love of Jesus Christ, who lived among us as one of us, laid down his life on the cross for our salvation, and continues in heavenly intercession for the salvation of the world.
4. We must make the mission of Jesus the model and inspiration for our own ongoing mission, which he has entrusted to his church.
5. We must continue to love the church as the body and bride of Christ, striving for its continuing renewal and faithfulness in carrying out its God-given mission.
6. We must be humble and patient toward one another, as we each come with a limited understanding and compromised obedience.

And finally, let us come in faith and hope, knowing that God's commitment to us as forgiven sinners is expressed in an everlasting covenant – and that the best is yet to come!