



# Grace for Missional Worship

**BY DAN PIERCE**

People have often asked me as both priest and singer-songwriter whether my songs are Christian. It's a trickier question than it first appears. My songs are not worship songs. Neither are they obvious couriers of the gospel. They are about fictitious characters and circumstances. They are about addiction, love, philosophy, ambition, failure. They are conflated stories from personal or borrowed experience. My songs are not obviously Christian but I am. When approaching all of these subjects, I approach them bringing every part of myself. So when I perform, I do so as a husband, a father, a brother, a son, a friend and, among many other things, a Christian. Are my songs Christian? No. Well, sort of. Yes and no.

The lights are dim. The venue is full. I am eight or nine songs into my set. It's been an intimate and responsive crowd. I love gigs like this. Even the people getting slowly hammered at the bar are listening attentively. I can see appreciative faces as I introduce the next song, called *Graceless*. Sometimes in between songs there is very little to say. Sometimes I simply begin the next one. Sometimes there's banter. At this point in the evening I have already told stories about lovers and drunkards but now I talk about *Graceless*. Contrary to the title, this song is all about grace. It lights me up. I explain what grace means to me; that no matter how much I have abandoned grace it has never reneged on its commitments. God has never given up. No matter

what alternative beliefs or dependencies vie for my heart, I am welcomed back to grace. The offer of God's unwarranted affection. Despite the theme, the song is not explicitly Christian. The song isn't but I am. When I sing it I carry 45 years of storied grace into every syllable and phrase. It's an outpouring of thanksgiving. It's worship. Missional worship.

You don't have to be a musician to engage in missional worship. It's not about music at all. Missional worship is when our passion for God pours out in unexpected places, in our everyday conversation, in our chance encounters, in our work, in our leisure and hobbies.

Tonally, missional worship sounds like a work colleague enthusiastically analysing the weekend's football, reliving the highlights and dissecting the game. Missional worship is when our love for God naturally bubbles up in out-of-context places. When I say out-of-context places it seems important to note there are few, if any, out-of-context places. What I mean is – out of church. Places we wouldn't normally associate with expressions of Christian devotion. A café, a living room, a shopping mall, a car journey. Just as pride for my sons, my allegiance to Manchester United or my love of film can be easily sparked in conversation, so it is with missional worship. I find myself speaking about my faith because it's integral to who I am. Missional worship is not a mechanical function. It cannot be illustrated and annotated like IKEA flat pack instructions. It is not a sales pitch or

an algorithm. It's not a technique that can be learned or a formula that can be applied. They won't teach you this at Bible school because it can't be taught exactly. Missional worship pours out of deepening relationship with God. That's it. It comes no other way but from understanding oneself as known and loved by God. Missional worship wells up as an involuntary and instinctive response, like when sci-fi fans geek out over rumours of a new intergalactic franchise.

At this point you might be concluding missional worship is an individual sort of affair with little application in the missionary endeavours of a Christian community. It certainly does spring from an individual's grasp of God's love for them but there can be a corporate dimension too. If the gathered people of God can learn the importance of gathering outside of church buildings and services then we move closer to creating conditions where missional worship can flourish. By this I don't mean simply putting on more events. I mean truly being in one another's lives. John 13:35 says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." If church was more woven into the fabric of day-to-day living we would create greater opportunity for that *love for one another* to be witnessed. If church did BBQ, movie night, litter picks, car washes, game night, house party, open mic night, after school club, trips to the park not so much as outreach projects but out of a genuine affection and time for each other, then we begin to get closer to the kind of situations where

missional worship can begin. This requires us to see church and mission less as a logic exercise to be solved and more like a Petri dish for playful experiment. This is less machine tooled evangelism and more akin to chemistry. This is less about creating events where evangelism *will* happen and more about creating lifestyle where missional worship *can* happen.

The obstacles in a corporate approach to missional worship are significant. There are three in particular that make it near impossible. First among them is time. Modern life is largely segmented - work life, family life and leisure time. Into this we can struggle to integrate church, never mind mission. Church gets reduced to an hour or two on a Sunday and sporadic courses, meetings and events. Church squeezes into the schedule.

The second obstacle is that we can't choose who belongs. We'd love it to be like-minded individuals. The likelihood is, however, that there will be people in our church with whom spending even an hour a week feels too much. People with whom we'd happily not spend five minutes, if we're honest. This is a significant challenge if corporate missional worship means creating more time together.

The third obstacle is that we don't all like the same activity. If I'm going to spend my time in Christian community with those I may or may not like, I at least want to be doing something I enjoy!

These three obstacles are tough to overcome. First, the relentless pressures on our time. Second, the complexity of our relationships. Third, the need for activities that meet our personal preference. These three obstacles can easily be fatal for any endeavours in corporate missional worship. These obstacles feed into each other and inhibit exploration. They produce a cycle of doom to which there is only one antidote. Grace.

Grace says I'll give my time to this even if the outcomes are unclear. Grace says I will love the next person I encounter even if that person irritates me. Grace says I will prioritise the opportunity for connection above my desire for any particular activity. Grace pulls us away from a preoccupation with personal preference and asks us to invest in others. Not because they deserve it but because that's the nature of grace.

As individuals, missional worship will spring naturally when we deepen our understanding of God's

grace at work in our lives. As church, missional worship will spring naturally when we deepen in our corporate understanding of God's grace at work in community. God's grace that calls us to sacrifice time, love the next person and dare to live beyond the comfortable ground of personal preference.

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