



How Does Worship Nourish our Missional Vocation?

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Mission is a contested word. It is not a biblical term but rather theological like Trinity or providence. For years mission referred to a cross-cultural activity that took the gospel from the 'Christian' West to the non-Christian non-West. This understanding has receded with the explosive growth of the non-Western church alongside the decline of the Western church.

During the 20th century, a new framework for mission emerged rooted in the mission of God. While this has become widely embraced the meaning of God's mission varies considerably. This is due partially to the loss of the narrative framework that originally defined that term. God's mission was articulated in terms of the work of the Triune God as narrated in the biblical story to restore his purpose for the whole creation and the entire life of humankind. The church's mission is understood within this broader redemptive-historical context.

The biblical story has a missional trajectory. God's renewing work moves from one family to all the families of the earth, from one nation to all nations, and from one place to the ends of the earth. The vocation of God's people is determined by the role they are called to play within this narrative trajectory.

That role may be summarized as the call to be the new humankind for the sake of the world in every idolatrous culture to the ends of the earth for the glory of God. In the Old Testament the vocation given to Israel was to be the true humanity that Adamic humanity failed to be. They were to display this distinctive life as an attractive alternative before the idolatrous nations of the Ancient Near East. But the Old Testament looked forward to a time when the nations would be incorporated into God's covenant people. That time arrived with the coming of the kingdom of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. God's kingdom is here breaking into the middle of history – the power of God to renew all things present by the Spirit. But it awaits the final act of God to complete his healing work. The era in between Jesus' first coming and his return is the time for the gathering in of the nations. Jesus sends his people in a new form – non-geographical, non-ethnic, non-national – to embody the life of the new humanity in every culture of the world amidst peoples who serve other gods. We are to be a preview of the coming kingdom as we have a foretaste of its life. We make known the good news of God's reign in our lives, words and deeds.

How might the worship of God's people contribute to this vocation?

The book of Revelation is concerned with missional faithfulness and full of worship. We can make three observations.

First, the God that is rendered in our worship must be greater than the gods that rule our culture. Our lives in every sector of life are to demonstrate the abundant and flourishing life that comes only in serving the true and living God. Yet the death-dealing gods that rule our culture are a powerful draw. The author of Revelation describes the idolatry of the Roman Empire as delusive (19:20), deceptive (13:14, 20:3, 8, 10), seductive (17:2, 18:3), intoxicating (17:2) and enchanting (18:23). How can we resist their spell? Only as we see the glory of God. The word 'glory' refers to the weightiness of God's character that demands recognition and commands our loyalty. The glory of God stands over against the glory of Rome and its gods (18:7). God's people are called to "Fear God and give him glory... worship him..." (Rev 14:7; cf. 11:13, 15:4, 19:5).

When the god of our worship is 'light,' born of a consumer and therapeutic society, we are not prepared to live in a world where its gods compete for our devotion. Richard Bauckham says it well: 'Revelation is overwhelmingly concerned with the truth of God... The church's witness will be of value only if it knows the truth worth dying for... In the end it is only a purified vision of

the transcendence of God that can effectively resist the human tendency to idolatry which consists in absolutizing aspects of the world.”[1]

Second, worship today needs to enact the true story of the world inviting God’s people to live in the real world it narrates. The ‘Church is a “story-formed community” that is rooted in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the Christ... In order for the community of faith to endure through time and to withstand the threats of inculturation, the story of what God has accomplished for the Hebrew people and the Christian community must be continually re-told in corporate worship.’[2]

As the church’s worship rehearses the story of God’s mighty acts it challenges all competing stories that falsely narrate the world, ushering us into the *real world*. [3] John’s unfolding vision comes on the Lord’s day, the day of worship (Rev. 1:10). The church in Asia Minor is threatened by the invincible power of Rome and is in deadly danger of being domesticated to the idolatry of the imperial cult. The worship of Revelation audaciously challenges Rome’s narrative. To the small and weak community, John makes bold to say that the true story of the world is revealed in a man crucified by the Roman Empire, a slain lamb who now reigns over all and is guiding universal history to its final goal. John ‘constructs a counter-narrative disputing the imperial one, opening up a different way of seeing the world.’[4] It is this story that is celebrated in the liturgy, songs and prayers of God’s people in Revelation. The worship of the early church in the Roman Empire was a witness to the true story of the world revealed in Jesus Christ which nourished them to live more faithfully in this story and refuse any compromise with the idolatrous structures of death.

Here we catch a glimpse of what worship ought to be. The cultural narrative that threatens us today is surely as dangerous. Today’s church is being co-opted by this story through entertainment and advertising, through television and internet, through sports and shopping malls. Worship today must witness to the real world, the true

story, the living God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and thereby form a people ready for a missionary encounter in their various callings.

Finally, our worship can nourish our new life in Christ for the sake of the world. There are two sides to this: worship nourishes our new life *and* it is for the sake of the world. Often the focus has been on the first supported with language of “means of grace.” But our worship must be a “missional means of grace.” God is present in our reading of Scripture, preaching, singing, confession, sacramental participation as means by which the new life of God’s kingdom flows to us to powerfully form us into the new humanity. But it is always for the sake of the world.

Worship can equip us for our mission by continually directing us outward to the unbelieving world as the ultimate horizon of our calling. Like the Psalms of the Old Testament, the songs of Revelation direct God’s people to the nations as the ultimate goal of God’s renewing work (15:3-4). When the church becomes introverted the various elements of worship function as channels of God’s grace to passive recipients for their own benefit. This puts the church in danger of what Karl Barth calls a ‘sanctified egocentricity’ with ‘praise [that] consists finally only in a many-tongued but monotonous *pro me, pro me...*’[5]

The same elements of liturgy can direct attention either inward on ourselves or outward to the nations. The way the word is preached and sacraments practised should orient us outward for the sake of the world. The way the congregation is gathered, welcomed and called to worship can remind the congregation that they have come from their callings in the world to be nourished for the sake of their neighbours. Confession of sin can be introduced and presented as a time to be cleansed from our capitulation to cultural idolatry, a time to be renewed and empowered for our calling in the world. Confessions of faith can be framed to reinforce a missional cast to our faith.[6] Our prayers should move beyond the needs of the congregation and direct us outward to a world in need. The

charge to the congregation followed by the benediction can encourage the congregation to think in terms of God’s presence empowering them for their mission. Our music is important as it has great power to form us. We need music that directs us to the world and is not co-opted by the narcissism and consumerism of our culture.[7]

The church is blessed *to be a blessing* and has been chosen *for the sake of the world!* Our worship must move us beyond the ‘blessed’ and the ‘chosen’ to the ultimate purpose and goal of God’s story – the blessing of the nations.

END NOTES

[1] Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 160.

[2] Paul H. Jones, ‘We are How We Worship: Corporate Worship as a Matrix for Christian Identity Formation’, *Worship* 69, 4 (July 1995): 353.

[3] See Rodney Clapp’s chapter ‘The Church as Worshiping Community: Welcome to the (Real) World’ in *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

[4] Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 104.

[5] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 3, 2, 567.

[6] An example of this is the contemporary testimony of the Christian Reformed Church entitled *Our World Belongs to God*. The longest section is entitled ‘The Mission of the Church’ (paragraphs 41-54). It is written in beautiful *poetic and doxological language* making it especially suitable for worship. It can be accessed at <https://missionworldview.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ea8a85f0ae5e48aa344cbfb43e88d5d37cb0b7.pdf>

[7] A good resource for such songs can be found in *Complete Mission Praise*, compiled by Peter Horrobin and Greg Leavers (London: Marshall Pickering, 1999).