



# The Missional Impact of Worship-Adoration

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There is a place where worship meets mission and lives are changed for eternity, yet this relationship has not always been easy. Volf has written how ‘Christian worship takes place in a rhythm of adoration and action.’[1] Not negating the Biblical foundations also for worship-action, my focus here is worship-adoration.

The place of worship is ubiquitous in scripture, but, until recently, barely present in missional literature. It is likely that historically inadequate foundations for mission contributed to this lacuna. Bosch observed in his *magnum opus*, *Transforming Mission*, that the early conversations around mission tended to ‘narrow the reign of God ... to the sum total of saving souls.’[2] From my research this focus on conversion seems to offer

one explanation as to why worship has been all but absent from such conversations. Worship-adoration is an inherent part of discipleship, holding significant place within the global Church’s worship expression.[3] As such, I suggest that there is an urgent need for it to be included in the discussion. I propose the relationship between worship-adoration and mission is crucial in this hour and that its impact has been largely unexplored.

## Impact of Song

In and of itself, the song has powerful impact physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually.[4] Physically, airways open and oxygen flows. Sound’s vibration and frequency have been found to impact the physical realm.[5] Emotionally, music’s mnemonic effect enables a song to powerfully

evoke memories or even stir us to action. In my teens I was struck by a friend’s call to mission, hearing God’s heart for prostitutes in Amsterdam through A-ha’s song ‘Hunting High and Low.’ The often-social nature of singing is tremendously positive for emotional well-being; to sing together is to feel part of something larger than oneself, as experienced from church to football match. We recall the powerful YouTube clips of Italians singing from their locked-in flats during Covid. Songs have also played a significant part in social transformation, as words carry both positive and negative messages. Meeropol’s ‘Strange Fruit’ arguably played a key part in challenging racial inequality.[6] It has been said, with good reason, ‘Let me write the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.’[7] Spiritually, Temple famously described worship



in the following way, and each component is outworked through song:

*...the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of the will to His purpose – and all gathered up in adoration...[8]*

### **The Song in Worship and Mission**

There are many ways to express adoration, yet numerous commands to sing to God and demonstrations of sung praise weave throughout the biblical record, culminating in the glorious *Song of the Lamb* at the end of time.[9] Additionally, Jehoshaphat's instruction to send worshippers ahead of the army led to victory in 2 Chronicles, and Paul and Silas's miraculous prison release in Acts clearly began with their sung praise, and resulted in both their freedom, and salvation for the jailer and his household. [10] Sung declarations of truth from a God-inclined heart posture frequently lead to an experience of God's presence and changed lives. God indeed inhabits his people's praise.[11]

Acknowledging the importance of contextualisation, what follows is not a proposed blueprint for transformation, but rather an invitation to listen, dream and seek God for His way forward for whatever Christian community you find yourself in. I offer three examples of how worship-adoration meeting mission can have substantial impact.

#### **1. Hidden worship – impacting our hearts**

There is an order to the rhythm of loving God and others – the call is first to adore and then to act. Volf corroborates, naming adoration 'the well-spring of action.' [12] As we express our love to God, responding to the Psalmist's call to praise and reminding ourselves of His character, we will increasingly encounter His love, leading to an increased love for others. That God is worthy of praise is reason enough to do so. However, the more we worship-adore, the more we will worship-act, including the action of mission. Whilst there are a number of ways of expressing praise, including through art and prayer, there is an emphasis on the call and command to sing in scripture. I propose that we cannot spend time in worship-adoration and not be changed, and that the more we love Him, the more our hearts will desire to share



this love with others. In a world of so many distractions, just as Jesus frequently took himself to a quiet place, as disciples we are invited to do the same. The motive is a deeper relationship with Jesus, but the impact is wider. Our challenge is to both model and encourage this amongst those we lead and worship alongside.

## 2. Invitation to encounter – impacting others’ hearts

I think back to my university ‘low cringe’ evangelistic events and wonder whether an encounter *with* God may have been considerably more fruitful for those attending than a presentation *about* God? Within an increasingly volatile world, people are seeking both spiritual experiences and authenticity. People often welcome an invitation to a genuine spiritual encounter. Fung, in his insightful book *The Isaiah Vision*, [13] writes of the need to partner with those already positively impacting community, and then invite these partners into the worship space. There is much we can adopt here as we seek to nurture the worship-mission relationship.

The move from attractional to incarnational mission as encouraged by Hirsch,[14] has been widely embraced. I propose the need is twofold – both to invite others into a place of worship encounter, and to take God’s presence to where people are. The need for worship to ‘escape’ the church walls is crucial within our post-Christendom culture. If this is not offered by the people of God, there are myriad other spiritualities vying for attention. As worship-adoration takes place in hospitals and shopping centres, God draws those with a spiritual hunger towards himself.

I recall mission trips where worship has been public – from a North African village, a French Tall Ships festival, a Croatian riverside, people’s homes in a closed Muslim nation, to a tea van in a Calais refugee camp. Each time, people have been impacted by watching believers worship, pouring out love to a God they do not yet know. Conversations and the opportunity to pray invariably follow. When worship-adoration is witnessed beyond the confines of church walls, atmospheres are changed and people outside the church community may encounter something profoundly beautiful and meet their Saviour.

## 3. Invitation to create – a beautiful antidote

The default for worship-adoration within the Western evangelical church is the dominating global worship model: churches aim for a quality band, playing the most popular songs.[15] There is, of course, much to be celebrated here – if a song reaches global audiences, it is likely because it expresses the heart of many, and able musicianship prevents distraction. However, much is lacking if this is the sole expression. I propose that we need to include other ways where the leitourgia or liturgy is precisely what it means – the work and voice of the people. The invitation to sing a new song is significant in scripture, whether from the spontaneous or prophetic ‘now’ song, or one crafted in the present.[16] Additionally, this spiritually seeking generation also has a considerable radar for the authentic. Rather than ending the

dominant model, we need creative alternatives alongside it to authenticate the value of the worship and songs of the current local context alongside the global.

In 2019, as part of my Masters’ research, I took a group of twelve people from my worshipping community through the experience of writing and incorporating their own song into our weekly worship, over a 7-week period. Whilst welcoming all, I particularly encouraged participation by those who would not necessarily call themselves musical. The project was incredibly enjoyable, illuminating and perhaps pioneering for us all. The group included one non-believer who by the end professed a faith in Jesus.

The findings were striking in relation to the potential scope of impact. It was humbling and exciting to see how empowered the participants felt, having created an authentic expression of heart worship which connected with their lives, concerns and hopes. Communal songwriting proved to be a beautiful antidote to many non-kingdom values such as materialism and individualism. The authentic voice of the people, apparent in words and melody, was indisputable. Kyle relates, ‘When one of your ideas is there and people are singing to it, it really surprises you.’[17] Creating and offering a song-gift to the community was profoundly anti-materialistic. Steve reflected, ‘The dynamic of getting involved with God and being a bit creative, it’s quite powerful. We are of him and we’re just reflecting back.’[18] The project created close community,



countering the individualism and isolation of our times. Kate stated, 'To actually be a part of something, to be actually doing something, it was great.'[19]

This simple process of communal songwriting was a locally contextualised form of worship, demonstrating a community built on kingdom principles. The leadership required for such a task is one which is humble and empowering, as it 'sees, values, empowers and puts to voice the praise of the whole people ...'[20] Its mark is authenticity, a key value for missional leadership.

### Summary

Where the personal, public and communal engagement of worship-adoration are embraced, the partnership of worship and mission will begin to thrive. The inclusion of community-written songs demonstrates an authenticity that people increasingly crave in western culture. The first thing needed is that we, the church, fall in love again with He who loved us first and will always love us best. Due to the many impacts of the song, sung worship-adoration is one excellent means through which to open our hearts to God's love.

*The task of the church is to creatively and faithfully sing the songs of the Lamb in the midst of a world founded upon the beastly principles of greed, decadence and violence... not an ugly protest, but a beautiful song; not a pragmatic system, but a transcendent symphony.*[21]

As we invite others into an encounter with God through our worship, openly demonstrating our affections for our King, they will discover that the lover of our souls is also the lover of theirs.

### End Notes

- [1] Volf (1993). p.207.
- [2] Bosch (1991). p.5.
- [3] There are notable exceptions such as the Quaker movement, and secret churches facing persecution.
- [4] A-ha, *Hunting High and Low* © 1985.
- [5] Amongst others, Emoto (2001) and McCollam (2012) have explored the impact of sound vibrations on physical matter. As embodied beings these discoveries are also extremely pertinent to us.
- [6] Meeropol, A. *Strange Fruit*. © (1937)
- [7] Fletcher in Wenham (2013). p. 13.
- [8] Temple (1941). p.30.
- [9] Revelation 15:3-4. The word 'sing' appears more than 400 times in scripture.
- [10] 2 Chronicles 20:21-22 and Acts 16:25-33.
- [11] Psalm 22:3 'But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.' (KJV) The word *inhabit* reflects well the Hebrew work *yasab*, to dwell, remain, sit, abide.
- [12] Volf (1993). p.210.
- [13] Fung (1992).
- [14] Hirsch (2006). p.147.
- [15] This is not dissimilar to the hymnbook model where a set number of songs were sung corporately by all.
- [16] Psalm 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isaiah 42:10; Revelation 5:9; 14:3.
- [17] Kyle in Poulson (2020). R8Q3. Kyle (Appendix J).
- [18] Steve in Poulson (2020). R8FQ2, 3. Steve (Appendix J).

- [19] Kate in Poulson (2020). R8Q6. Kate (Appendix J).
- [20] Hunsberger (2015). p.78.
- [21] Zahnd (2012). Prelude.

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