

On Ancient Future Worship

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I would like to start a conversation with you, and I would like to begin with two questions. First, does the institutional church resemble the church our Lord established? This question has great implications for the way we think about and approach biblical worship. Second, how do we begin to think and act missionally as worship leaders? I include musicians, artists, pastors, theologians, homileticians, teachers, in fact, all church leaders in the worship leader category. In other words, how do we participate in the mission of God without losing our livelihoods?

Does the institutional church resemble the church our Lord established?

Writing on the "doing" of story-formed, biblical worship, Bob Webber stated, "It remembers God's work in the past, anticipates God's rule over all creation, and actualizes both past and future in the present to transform persons, communities, and the world."¹ I propose that ancient future, biblical worship looks somewhat like the "early" church, rooted in the story of God, situated in a nurturing community, gathered around the table, and concerned with formation over performance.

The content of biblical worship is the gospel, the Christ event, and it proclaims that "God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves."² The structure of Christian worship is dialogical, call and response, anticipation and remembrance, Word and table. Content and structure are non-negotiables for Christian worship. I find that most of the worship conversations that church leaders want to engage in deal only with the issue of style. While it is crucial to embrace and express worship arts with aesthetic integrity and quality, style is negotiable and indigenous, facilitating the content and structure. I believe we should encourage our churches to frame worship discussions first in the realms of content and structure before addressing the style issue.

The ancient, biblical story-formed approach to worship remembers and anticipates the great saving acts of God culminating in the finished work AND ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ, which usher in the manifest presence of God and conform us into his image. In worship we participate in His story, the story which tells the whole world about its true self and the limitless love of God. This, I believe, is the foundation of biblical, ancient future worship, and it's the good news we are called to live and proclaim in worship.

How do we begin thinking missionally about worship leadership?

First, we need to change our perspective on mission. The biblical orientation is not that God's church has a mission, but God's mission has a church! Jürgen Moltmann declared, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."³ Eric Bolger stated, "Worship is understood as a retelling of the biblical story, which has at its center the *Missio Dei*. . . . [IWS'] goal is to develop leaders for God's kingdom who are not only practically proficient but also able to train others in leading and promoting worship that takes the *Missio Dei* seriously. Corporate worship is itself missional, anticipating the eschatological consummation towards

¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 43.

² *Ibid.*, 35

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 64.

which God's mission in the world is moving. Corporate worship also proclaims and enacts the *Missio Dei*, and concludes by sending worshipers into the world as a missional people."⁴ Ryan Bolger and Mark Lau Branson write about a necessary shift from ecclesiocentric mission (focused on advancing Christendom), to a theocentric mission (as part of a missional engagement of the world, focused on advancing the Kingdom).⁵ This change has been described as a shift from church as destination to church as connection. Our destination is Kingdom life!

What is the impact of this perspective on worship? We need to be thinking missionally about the church and the ministry of worship leadership. Jesus didn't come, die, resurrect, ascend and sit at the right of the Father just to give us careers in church work. Our careers in church work are a means to an end, the end being the furtherance of the Kingdom! Now, this is not particularly good news for program-driven ministry. But, there is a needful shift in our understanding of what the church does and why, and this shift impacts worship. I don't fully know what this looks like yet, but I know we are called to proclaim the Kingdom, not Christendom! While we embrace our contexts and distinctives, they are subservient to the mission—the life, love and Kingdom of God.

Ancient future worship uniquely connects the historical, biblical story of God to the mission of God in its remembering-anticipating posture and awareness of the ongoing nature of the incarnation. We're in God's story NOW as the ongoing incarnation of His presence in and mission to the world. Let's reveal that in our worship. And, let's continue this conversation.

⁴ Eric Bolger, *Missional Theology of IWS: A Working Description*, June 2007, <http://www.iwsalumni.org/resources/Missional_Theology_of_IWS.htm>.

⁵ Mark Lau Branson and Ryan Bolger, *A Missional Theology for Evangelical Seminaries* (Allelon Missional Schools Project, 21-23 February 2007), Eagle, Idaho: Allelon Publishing, 2007.