

Worship and Justice: Spirituality that Embodies and Mobilizes for Justice

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Abstract

Christian worship is the communal gathering of God's people in which we glorify God for His person and actions. This encounter with God includes gathering together, encountering the triune God in the word and sacrament, and sending the community out into the world as agents of His love and justice. This paper is meant to highlight the importance of worship in forming people who walk humbly with God, love mercy, and do justice.

Worship is formative, so we must ask, "What are we forming?" What we include or exclude from our worship practices in preaching, prayer, music, and arts informs our theology and our embodied faith. I examine the importance of spirituality that embodies and mobilizes for justice, the challenges in breaking people free from idolatry in worship, and the implications on the church and its role in the world. I rely on case studies from local congregations, denominations, and organizations for both illustration and to help suggest some best practices for those seeking to build bridges at the intersection of worship and justice.

There are churches that make worship a priority, and yet the worship doesn't result in transformed disciples with increased compassion and love for neighbor. What does it look like for us to develop practices of worship that mobilize our communities towards justice and to model just practices in our worship? While there are some dialogues on contextualized worship and or multicultural worship, they often employ approaches that model little more than tokenism and appropriation. I start by exploring the theological intersection of worship and justice and then move to worship and formation. The strategies I propose are rooted in worship that embodies hospitality, solidarity and mutuality. I conclude by reimagining a worship that does more than entertain us.

Theology at the Intersection of Worship and Justice

The Law

The law was given to God's people as a way to live a life that embodied his character and the way of his kingdom. When the Lord gave his commandment to the people its very foundation was the intersection of worship and justice. The description of God being inclined to the systemically marginalized, sandwiched between the command to Love God, and the command

to love the most vulnerable makes it clear that loving others is at the core of knowing and loving God. This is made clear in Deuteronomy:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD...He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God. (Deut 10:12-20)

The Prophets

The words of the prophets, such as Micah, Isaiah, and Amos, reoriented God's people to the reality that social righteousness is central to a life that is pleasing to God. Through his words he attacked the abuse of power and condemned Israel's worship. We hear their strong words about worship without justice:

I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:21-24)

Like a prosecuting attorney, Amos was charging them with their failure to live a life of true worship. While Amos is clearly addressing their idolatry, which is mentioned two times, he is highlighting their injustice and abuse of the poor by mentioning it five times. He charges them with the five following things 1) being self-important, 2) using wealth as a means of luxury, 3) neglecting the poor, 4) treating people like commodities 5) perverting justice in the courts which ultimately has led to idolatry. Like other prophets, such as Isaiah and Micah, he described the abuse and evil of society and appealed to God's people to repent of these sins. He doesn't give them an out either, making clear that indirect oppression is no more acceptable than direct oppression; it is still sin against God himself. Continuing to worship through rituals when not living justly only adds to transgression. Amos 5 clearly argues that true worship cannot exist without justice.

The sharp language used in this passage conveys the revulsion of God. The Lord is saying to these "worshippers," "I can't stand your worship, I can't stomach the stench." The Israelites were sitting in their own filth and probably had no idea how bad they smelled. It's like being on a road trip for more than twelve hours and getting used to your odor. You do not even realize how bad you smell! The Lord goes on to say through Amos, "I will not look at you." Their

worship had become a mechanical means of appeasing their God. They had pretty buildings, pretty objects, pretty songs, but they were not beautiful to the Lord because they lacked justice. There is a clear movement in the text that encompasses all the senses: from smelling to seeing to hearing. At this point the Lord just says, "Shut it! Away with your singing." Their soulless worship was a burden to the Lord and he was fully disgusted. How might the Lord experience our worship today?

We gather in pretty buildings with pretty music and neglect the vulnerable people we drive or walk past on our way there. We produce "Christian" products without ever asking about the work conditions of those who manufactured them. *True worship is not about style or form. True worship has little to do with music or offerings or services-but with seeking God and living in response.* We need to be cautious and hear this clear warning from Amos. The ethics of a worshiper matter; our lives must overflow with righteousness and justice. Our religious lives are busy-and we can think we're cool because of all our activities, but true worship requires mercy and justice toward others and obedience to God's commands. Mark Labberton writes,

The way human beings are created to reflect God's glory by embodying God's character in lives that seek righteousness and do justice. Worship turns out to be the dangerous act of waking up to God in the world, and then living lives that actually show it...True worship includes the glory and honor due to God—Father, Son and Spirit. It also includes the enactment of God's love and justice, mercy and kindness in this world."

When was the last time you heard a sermon from Amos or any other prophet as a part of the "worship" discussion at church? How might the Lord experience us today if he smelled, saw, and heard our "worship"? We may need to repent that our focus has been on the style of worship versus the content of our worship, which includes God's teaching about justice. Compare how much time and money we have spent consuming "Christian" worship to the attention we have given in caring for the needs of the poor. He might say to us "Shut Up!"

The Great Commandment

Living a life committed to justice for all people makes sense to those of us that grow up with or among displaced, silenced, or systemically oppressed communities. Growing up with family in both Argentina and Colombia, I developed an awareness of the poverty and injustice in the world. As Catholics, social action was taught as a key worship activity of my Christian upbringing. We learned that our love and worship, anchored in Matthew 22:37-40, was intertwined with a call to love our neighbor: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Along with the greatest command from the lips of Jesus, my Catholic

foundations highlighted the Sermon on the Mount as a lens for worship. The life and words of Jesus painted a compelling picture.

The apostles continue to give testimony to the centrality of the great commandment by questioning a love for God that does not include and intersect with love for our brothers and sisters. The themes in Acts, James, and well as 1 John continue to draw us into reorientation and repentance. The following calls from 1 John are piercing:

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:16)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 John 4:7-8)

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20-21)

Love for God encompasses love for the fatherless, the hurting, your brothers, your neighbors. Loving them requires seeing, naming, and standing in their pain as well as tangibly responding to the things that affect under-resourced or marginalized populations.

My prayer is that we will cultivate worship with our time by serving the marginalized. That we will cultivate worship through our finances by giving to ministries that will advance the mission of God. That we will cultivate worship with our influence as a global citizens in advocating in issues such as education, sex trafficking, and immigration. In order to cultivate a passion in our communities and mobilize for justice we must ask ourselves what are we doing to intentionally form that theological understanding in them.

Worship is Formative

Influence of Worship

People often visit me in Chicago. When I prepare for them, I ask them what they enjoy doing. I want to know if they are fans of sports, museums, shopping or entertainment. Knowing what they want allows me to craft a tour that will fit their desires. I love taking people to places they want to go. However, as a Chicago native, I also know that there are places that they *need* to

go. There are foods they must eat and sights they must see to fully experience our great city! There is a restaurant in my neighborhood that invented a plantain and steak sandwich called a *Jibarito*. Whenever friends come back to visit, they beg me to take them again. While they wanted the deep-dish pizza, they needed the *Jibarito*. A good guide takes you to places you want to go, but a great guide takes you places you need to go.

Worship leaders take people where they want to go. We help them enter into God's presence and encounter God in ways that are familiar and comforting. In addition, we take them to places they need to go to understand God more deeply. We guide them into a fuller experience of God's character, which is a difficult task that takes both theological and experiential wisdom. When worship practices miss this second step, it forms disciples that are self-centered.

Challenges to Change

Worship often begins by taking people where they want to go. We all want to experience God in ways that are familiar. Our way of relating, whether to God or people, develops naturally out of our personalities, experiences, and preferences. This preferred way of relating with God affects how we approach congregational worship. It is important for our felt needs to be met in worship so that we can “connect” with God in ways that are relevant to us as individuals. This allows us to have an authentic, sincere, genuine experience with God. A few years ago I introduced a Kenyan worship song for a missions Sunday at my church. Although the congregation seemed to enjoy the new form of worship, I could see them nervously smiling as they danced. After a few minutes in Kiswahili, I transitioned into a song with which they were more familiar. With eyes closed, feet planted and hands lifted high, the congregation came alive at a new level. I knew I had them when their arms hit the sky!

While it is natural to desire an experience of God that “fits” us, we can sometimes be egocentric or community-centric instead of God-centric. When it comes to the modern consumer of worship, comfort is king! I am sure we can all recall conversations when we have either heard or said, “I was not feeling worship at that church.” About this consumer approach to worship Pam Howell writes:

“Can you imagine the Israelites, freshly delivered from slavery, before a mountain that trembles violently with the presence of God (Exod. 19), muttering: We’re leaving because we’re not singing the songs we like. Like that tambourine song, how come they don’t do that tambourine song anymore?”

“I don’t like it when Moses leads worship; Aaron’s better.” “This is too formal—all that smoke and mystery. I like casual worship.” “It was okay, except for Miriam’s dance—too wild, not enough reverence. And I don’t like the tambourine.”

This scene seems absurd, given that these ex-slaves had been liberated by God himself. God's people were not evaluating worship; instead they were filled with awe, fear and hope. However, many today come with a list of preferences and a self-centered attitude toward worship. As created beings, we want to meet God in real ways, to experience repentance, healing, freedom, restoration, and joy. Each of us comes with our own issues from the week and need to come just as we are. This type of space in worship is needed- but if our worship is just about staying in our familiar, comfortable experiences, we will get stuck. If we truly hope to go deeper in our worship with God, we may need to exchange where we *want to go for where we need to go*. Worship is not about entertaining ourselves: it is the communal gathering of God's people in which we glorify God for His person and actions. The repetition of prayers, the rehearsing of songs, the challenge of the word form theological emphases from which we live.

Strategies for Change

As Christian leaders we are presented with the challenge then to confront the idolatry of preference in our communities and develop practices that become onramps to lead God's people to embrace the fullness of Christian worship as displayed in the psalms and modeled in the scriptures. We lead in the reality of a consumer driven approach to local congregations, and the impact on the decisions we make as to how much we can stretch our people. If changes in a local congregation require that much intentionality, organizational changes require even more effort and at many levels. We need to identify the stakeholders and the existing structures that are ripe for change.

Over the past decade as I have consulted with churches, universities and institutions I have heard some common reasons why people do not want to implement change. After many hours of conversation on change management, I am left with a few learning points. First, interpret! Leaders serve as interpreters of an experience for their community. Changing culture requires us to explain the changes along the way, otherwise our silence is left to the wrong interpretation. Even if people don't like what we are doing, they will know what we are doing and why. Second, get feedback along the way. This is not something that can be done on our own but needs the involvement of the whole community. Leaders must pay attention to the dynamics of the congregation. We must also make sure we are listening to a variety of voices, and if we are intentionally trying to help the community lean into the work of compassion and justice, we must pay special attention to those who are often marginalized and most impacted by the injustices and ask if our approach is honoring their community's story. Third, we must be intentional about what we are creating. Each worshiping community must pursue a specific approach that makes sense for its context. Finally, when introducing change, it's important to acknowledge those who've gone before us. The last thing we want to communicate to our communities is that what they have done, even for generations, does not have any worth.

Leading worship that mobilizes for Justice requires leadership that is willing to take calculated risks towards change. Leaders must be willing to do the following: 1) Connect change to the mission or big picture, 2) Gather a group of stakeholders affected by the change, 3) Have them work together, 4) Get the buy-in of the top tier leadership, 5) Develop a vision of what things will look like in five years, 6) Communicate, Communicate, Communicate, and 7) Empower and help people to find their place and contribution.¹

Worship That Embodies and Mobilizes for Justice

Solidarity in Worship Mobilizes for Justice

Quest Church of Seattle is a multiethnic church of nine hundred primarily composed of Asian American and white American congregants. They are committed to community, reconciliation, compassion, justice and a global presence. While their church is only about 15 percent Latino and African American, they are committed to walking in solidarity with one another. They have an annual “faith and race” class, and interweave the issues of the world into their worship experiences. Quest regularly incorporates global lament during the pastoral prayer portion of worship. They spend time naming the global realities and standing with the communities in prayer. One Sunday evening they hosted a special event focusing on the 270 Nigerian school girls kidnapped by Boko Haram terrorists on April 14, 2014. Quest leaders invited people to a prayer space with prompts toward lament and protection. They wanted to be in solidarity with their neighbors.

Solidarity means we identify with one another in the practices of lament and joy; we join in empathetic grieving and rejoicing. This is not a new practice or idea; the Scriptures clearly call us to solidarity. We stand with one another in lament that leads to hope. We rejoice with one another when we see glimpses of the power of the gospel transforming situations. In solidarity we hope for this coming reality:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things

¹ Steps based on Dr. Kotter’s 8-Step Process. <http://www.kotterinternational.com/the-8-step-process-for-leading-change/>

has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:1-5)

This type of solidarity in worship transports us from the reality of the not yet into the what will be. It reminds us of the kingdom to come. We can envision a place where we all as one body draw in closer to the glory of our God. We also learn to stand with one another in the pain and depth of the now. Solidarity is not just a feeling; it can and should be practiced through word and deed. It should be practiced as we stand with one another in protest against injustice. It should be practiced through repentance and forgiveness. Worship can and should be a catalyst. These catalytic events can often be painful but powerful.

When Christians respond publicly to current societal issues, it is evident that we have strikingly different perspectives based on our cultural and social location. Our reaction reveals how polarizing our viewpoints can be. We stand not with one another but on opposite sides. It’s fantastically horrible to see how Christians treat one another across those differences. Ideally the experience of being in a diverse community with one another would create a space of reconciliation and solidarity in which empathy and understanding could be developed particularly for those who are most deeply impacted by systemic injustice. However even in homogenous communities we want to imagine what worship that embodied justice in standing in solidarity could look like.

Worship practices that help us stand in solidarity bring us beyond what we do and what we experience into to the effects of injustice on others. The de-centering of our worship space for the centering of those who have been systemically marginalized is in itself a practice of justice. We can do this singing and praying for people with our words and songs. We can also do this by singing and praying with people as we utilize the songs they share with us. I do want to caution that taking songs from people without relationship and long-term commitment to stand in solidarity with them can be experienced as tokenism and appropriation. Many of the multi-cultural models of worship for diverse churches in North America, as well as “global conferences” that are primarily led by Western influences, leaders employ an approach to inclusive worship that is disembodied. Songs and prayer will be selected from songs books at random, or because of ease of accessibility, but they are not connected to the narrative of or in dialogue with the people from which they come. Embodied solidarity requires us standing with them (proximity), not merely standing for them.

Mutuality in Worship Embodies Justice

Mutuality moved beyond standing in solidarity with our neighbors and takes us to learning from one another. Mutuality acknowledges that there are not students and teachers, but co-learners. This reciprocity honors the reality that the entire body is necessary and all play a

meaningful role in the community. The differences we bring in gender, culture, social location, abilities, and age should be acknowledged, honoured, and embodied or represented somewhere in our worship. This act of mutuality in designing worship practices embodies justice and forms disciples that understand what Martin Luther King Jr said about justice and mutuality. He said,

“We must all learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”

As worship leaders we can help people experience this reality in worship. At a worship gathering of global leaders we worshiped to a song called “Magdan Lik,” which was given to us by some of my friends at St. Samaans Church, also known as the Cave Church in the Mokattam (Garbage City), just outside Cairo, Egypt. This community undergoes tremendous persecution as a religiously and socioeconomically marginalized community. The faith I saw them exhibit under systemic oppression was grounded in their legacy story of Simon the Tanner, who literally moved Mokattam mountain in prayer (prophet of Baal style).

Choosing that song was significant to me for a couple of reasons. First, I had been profoundly changed by my partnership with Egyptian Coptic Christians, and I wanted to expose American Christians to their depth of faith and compassion. Second, I wanted the participants to hear the Arabic language being used to worship Jesus. Too often we associate certain sounds, rhythms, and images as being un-Christian, when they are merely un-Western. Hearing the language and rhythms, and seeing the Arabic characters on the screen, was a teaching moment for many worshippers and a healing moment for many Arabic speakers who felt alienated by the American church. Worship is a way of connecting our lives with the lives of Christians in a completely different context in order to learn what it might be like to tell God “All my life is yours” in the midst of persecution and poverty.

Embodied Justice/Decolonization of Worship

Mutuality goes even deeper than inclusivity and appreciation. These relationships of reciprocity facilitate the decolonization of worship. Liturgical structures and practices that embody justice intentionally seek to de-center communities that have historically been in power by naming the practices and theology they imposed on indigenous communities. This is especially true for nations that were “christianized” by European missionaries or later “evangelized” by North American missionaries. The effects of the political colonization on continents like Africa, Latin American, and Asia carried over into the theological colonization. As such, worship was also

colonized. As faith was brought to the nations so were dress codes, hymnals, and “proper” liturgical practices coming from Lutheran, Anglican, Dutch Reformed and other European nations. Music, instruments, stories, and narratives of the people were stripped away and seen as less reflective of the bible. It was godlier to use an organ, instead of drums, so missionaries and schools actually shipped organs and pianos to ensure that correct forms of worship were being practiced. Currently, global worship practices are shaped by a small group of worship movements on three western continents (North America, Europe and Australia), continuing in the pattern of theological colonization that impacts the worship of the entire church.

Decolonizing worship is the work of asking why Christian practices from the Global South mirror both western liturgical forms and modern contemporary Christian expressions and acknowledging the impact of that reality on the whole church. Reflection, acknowledgement, repentance of the oppressive ways worship has been imposed on Christians around the world historically will ultimately also result in our liberation. We will be able to see what we have and are missing.

Like O-negative blood types, the universal theological donors are Western Evangelicals. This universal donor is always translating books into other languages, planting churches in other countries, setting up seminaries on other continents, or gathering “global assemblies” with planning teams that have been highly influenced by the West. We never seem to have the same intentionality to receive from our global friends. Today more than ever the North American church is in need of a remedy to the blind spots in our theology that are shaped by our ethnocentric worship practices and ultimately impact our formation as Christ followers. We need to be formed by the liturgical practices of the Global Church, but first we must find churches that have not just adopted North American forms. We must ask why there are so many churches around the world that just want to mimic Hillsong.

The American Evangelical Church witnesses the growth of the church in Latina America, Africa, and Asia as it hopes for a vibrant revival in our own churches. Churches of color in urban settings as well as immigrant churches also show huge promise to be the future of the church in America. Worship has been at the root of the growth in the non-Western, non-white settings. Pentecostal prayer forms and new songs telling the story of a community’s encounter with God are springing up. Revival and reclaiming of indigenous instruments and dancing find their way to our ears and our feet. The de-Westernization and breaking free of the shackles of forms of worship that were used as forms of colonization and oppression are in full force. We in the West should not be scared but blessed. We are in need of the spiritual practices of our Southern brothers and sisters.

We must ask ourselves what theological truths does post-colonial worship, liberated from western colonizers power, contribute? What can contextualized practices in worship look like in

a post-colonial church? What harm do we inflict on the majority church located in the global south if we continue to export a practice of worship that is theologically and socially located in the west? What is the loss to Western Christianity if we don't listen to the voices of the global church in worship and formation?

Kaitlin Curtice, a native American author and worship leader responds with these wise words, “Decolonization is not just for the oppressed. It is a gift for everyone. Just as growing pains hurt before the growing happens, so it hurts to decolonize — for some, it hurts like hell. And then one day, we all end up on the other side of something— healed”²

This does not mean that Western worship practices will go away. On the contrary, they will be liberated to be celebrated by Western and non-Western cultures for our collective transformation, and the glory of God and advancement of his purposes in the world. They can be seen as one of the beautiful contributions to the whole.

Bruce Theron, a pastor near Stellenbosch, South Africa echoes this by saying, “Local songs are not to free the colonized but for the liberation of the colonizer as well.”

Mutuality communicates need for one another and confronts the lie that any one culture is more in line with the scriptures than another culture. The practice of growing in mutuality and altering and restructuring our worship will help to decolonize worship.

Conclusion

How can we say we love God? How can we offer to him songs and words, how can we have a multi-billion dollar worship industry and yet be so detached from the issues of injustice that are rampant in our countries and in our world? We can do this because we have practiced a spirituality that does not embody or mobilize for justice. We have worship concerts, worship schools, and church music programs that have no integration of worship as formation. We see worship leaders as musicians and not as pastors, prophets, or guides who lead people where they need to go instead of where they want to go. We’ve made worship about us. For some this may mean holding on to traditions for safety and comfort, and for others new forms of worship about entertainment and free expression. The Scriptures call us to a worship that results and is inclusive of worship. To be a follower of Christ is to have a spirituality that embodies and mobilizes for justice.

² <https://kaitlincurtice.com/>

*Portions of this paper are excerpts or concepts from my books *The Mission of Worship* (IVP) and *The Next Worship* (IVP) as well as a book I currently working on entitled *Decolonizing Worship*.