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A FRESH LOOK AT A GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING OF WORSHIP

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WE, BEING MANY,
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A FRESH LOOK AT A GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING OF WORSHIP

After this I looked and there before me
was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation,
tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front
of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding
palm branches in their hands. Revelation 7:9 (NIV)

The Great Misconception:

WHY MUSIC IS NOT A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

By Robin Harris

“Ethno-what?”

People always say that when they hear what I do. I sigh, knowing the familiar script that will unfold, like one I recently had:

“I’m an ethnodoxologist.”

Eyebrows raised, the quizzical look ensues. “What in the world is that?”

“Well, ethnodoxology studies the way people worship the Lord in cultures around the world.”

The quick shake of the head and slow blink of the eyes demonstrate it was the first time he had thought about how other cultures worship.

“Hmm,” he responded. “What’s the use of knowing that? Don’t they just sing the songs we do?” At least he was being honest. “My job is to encourage and equip Christians in various cultures to express their faith through their own heart musics and other arts.”

His eyes brightened, “Hey, heart music! Is that kind of like heart language? A missionary once told me that people should have access to the Bible in their heart language.” Now it’s my turn to be surprised.

“Yep, that’s right!” I respond, “Just like each person has at least one heart language, we all have our own heart music; it’s like a mother tongue for expressing your heart, and it affects how you worship.”

“Wow, that’s, um... interesting. But isn’t music, like... a universal language?”

Musical Misnomer

“Music is the universal language.” How often have we heard the phrase? It’s amazing—the power of an oft-repeated, unexamined aphorism. This one in particular, it sounds so, romantic—convincing. Yet this notion has had some major effects on the worship practice of the North American church and the mission movement that grew out of it.

The phrase in question first appeared in the writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the early 19th century. Close to two centuries later, it filters into our pop songs and permeates our collective consciousness as one of those unexamined assumptions, which for many shapes their worship theology, their mission practices, and how they speak about music in everyday conversations.

What are the logical outcomes of thinking of music as a “universal language”?

♦ What it means to me, it probably means to you.

- ♦ There’s only “good/bad” or “high/low” in this language of music, not different music languages.
- ♦ Since I speak this universal language, I should know what qualifies as a high or low expression.
- ♦ Given a choice, people probably prefer to use Western music.

What is the state of the music debate in your church? Have you seen these assumptions in your context? If so, how have they affected the breadth of styles that your church sings? We’ll address the implications of those statements for the local church in North America soon enough, but for now, let’s take a look at what we exported to other countries.

We Went, We Sang, We Conquered...

During the 19th and 20th centuries, as Western and European Christians went out around the world, they were influenced by the prevalent philosophies of their

home cultures, such as cultural evolutionism, which asserted that Western culture was the most highly developed and placed “tribal” cultures further down the evolutionary scale. These unchallenged ideas resulted in the musical expressions of the newly encountered cultures being labeled with such descriptors as “primitive” and “heathen” —some even tried to “help” the local music-makers by teaching them to sing in unison and by encouraging the translation of Western Christian songs into local languages. Current practice no longer includes such offensive labels, but neither does it always demonstrate a value for the God-given musical and artistic resources of the host cultures.

Because of the widely accepted view that music is a universal language, it never occurred to most Christian workers that just as they were learning new, complex, and “strange-sounding” languages in order to communicate with local people, they also needed to learn to understand the local music systems. Instead, they brought their Bible in one hand and a hymnbook in the other. Often the Bible was translated into the vernacular, but when it came to the hymnbooks, only the words changed (in translation), not the basic musical language of the songs.

Concerned by the charges of “music colonialism,” a number of missionaries over the last several decades have begun to resist this trend. As they incorporated into their thinking and practice the principles of ethnomusicology (the study of music and culture), missiology (especially biblical contextualization), and the burgeoning field of worship studies, a new breed was born—the ethnodoxologist.

In the late ’90s, profoundly influenced by John Piper’s writing on the connection of worship to missions, worship leader and missionary Dave Hall coined the term ethnodoxology. From the combination of two Greek terms, *ethne* (peoples) and *doxos* (praise/glory), Hall defined the term as “the study of the worship of God among diverse cultures” and stressed that worship was “first and foremost a life to be lived, and secondarily an event in which

continued on page 28

to participate...scripture calls us to both (cf. Ps 95 and Rom 12:1).

How does that apply to us here at home? Forty years ago Tozer wrote a book in which he described worship as the missing jewel of the evangelical church. If he were alive today, he'd be amazed! At that time, there were no courses or conferences anywhere on the topic of worship. Now it's a completely different story.

Unfortunately, the "music is a universal language" paradigm has infected our weekly worship gatherings. One of the causes of the worship wars is that we fail to take into account basic differences in music languages—and we don't accept the cultural and biblical values expressed in those differences. We sometimes judge one another's music for perceived "goodness" and "badness" on the basis of our own cultural values, not allowing room for the validity of other musical cultures.

In the worship debates, ethnodoxologists are joining hands with the multiethnic worship movement to apply the principles of ethnodoxology to our churches here at home. What's our goal? We want to see expressions of heart worship in the worldwide global church which embrace the various *ethne* in their communities, not just the majority culture.

The Local Implication

What are the ethnodoxological principles that apply to both the pew and the mission field? I propose that we start with these:

- Music is not a universal language—our responses to music are learned, not intrinsic.
- Just like in spoken language, a heart music must be understood to be interpreted correctly.
- All peoples should have the opportunity to worship God in their own heart languages and music.
- Churches that value heart music and arts in worship, reflecting the various cultures in their communities, are demonstrating the love of Christ to the world.

An Unstoppable Movement

I realize that in calling myself an ethnodoxologist, I will continue getting quizzical looks. Moreover, the conversation that starts with "Ethno-what?" will continue to be a regular part of my life. But what

I love about that conversation is that I get to talk about the four important principles outlined above—principles that are slowly, but surely, infusing the minds and hearts of worship pastors, mission leaders, and laypeople around the world.

If you don't feel comfortable calling yourself an ethnodoxologist just yet, then at least help us out a little. Next time you hear the phrase "music is a universal language," do the world a favor and speak up! Point out that music systems, more than any verbal language, are culture specific and must be learned to be understood. Music, although universally found in every culture, is not a universal language!

Robin Harris is co-founder and CEO of the International Council of Ethnodoxologists (ICE) and serves with OM's Heart Sounds International, focusing on music research and ethnodoxology ministry in Siberia while pursuing a Ph.D. in Music (Ethnomusicology). The Harrises have been missionaries for 25 years.

"Often the Bible was translated into the vernacular, but when it came to the hymnbooks, only the words changed (in translation), not the basic musical language of the songs."

Declare God's Glory:

A VISION FOR GLOBAL WORSHIP

By Frank Fortunato

It's Christmas season at a large Southern California church. The music director announces that the next song will be a Nigerian Christmas carol sung and performed on 12 djembe drums. An African cry of excitement pierces the air in the filled-to-capacity 5,000-seat auditorium. Dr. Roberta King, from Fuller Theological Seminary described the moment as one of ecstatic joy for those Nigerian Californians who had the opportunity to experience Christmas for those few moments in their own musical language.

The fact is there is a wide world out there of worship expressions in the church of Jesus Christ. Never before have we been in such a position to see, hear, and even adopt such a culturally rich and varied palette of praise to the God of all the earth.

John Witvliet, head of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, sizes up the daunting attempt to get our minds around all that is out there: "The topic of Christian worship worldwide ... is endlessly interesting, profoundly instructive,

and unmanageably large. The scope is nothing less than the worship practices of the world's two billion Christians—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal—in 200-plus countries and hundreds of cultural and ethnic groups, each of whom have unique patterns of dress, speech, aesthetic sensibilities, interpersonal communication habits..." What follows is an attempt to offer some brushstrokes on the huge global worship canvas. A good place to begin is Psalm 96:3: "Declare His glory among the nations."

Revelation of *Glory*

Glory. What an awe-filled word—the sum total of all His perfections and attributes. Some describe glory as God's brilliance and presence radiating through the universe. In sublime language Barth spoke of glory as "a great outpouring of overflowing light begun in the Trinity extended into all creation, in which we are invited to participate through wor-

ship.” We humans could never comprehend such dazzling glory emanating endlessly from the very throne room of God. In His kindness, God “earthed” and grounded His glory for us: “The Word became flesh and blood ... We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son” (Jn 1:14 The Message). In an astonishing biblical passage God invites us to participate in His glory. Paul describes a “face-changing” transforming activity: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18, NASB).

Witvliet offers a slightly modified metaphor. Rather than a mirror reflecting glory back to us, he suggests peering through to God’s glory. He shares: “Think of worship as a window. In Psalm 63 we ‘behold God’s power and glory... [We see] ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6).” He goes on: “The temptation we face as worship leaders is that we will spend so much energy dressing this window, repairing this window, or cleaning this window that we have no time to look through it ... pondering the sheer beauty and glory of God.”

Glory as Doxological Evangelism
Edmund Clowney thundered out to the 17,000 delegates at the Urbana 1976 missions convention: “Ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to announce our international anthem: ‘Declare His glory among the nations, His wondrous works among all the peoples’ (Ps 96:3 DBY). ...We are called to doxological evangelism. When the people of God sing His praises, then the nations listen.” Clowney wove worship and mission together and started to redefine evangelism itself as an act of worship—a declaring of glory. When someone says: “Let me tell you how great God is and the great thing He has done for you through Jesus,” such sharing is evangelism using worship vocabulary.

The worship-mission continuum came to full bloom at Urbana 2000 when Barney Ford shared: “Urbana 2000 is about worship leading to mission and mission leading to worship—all in response to God’s initiative and great love:

‘Because He first loved us.’”

Popular author and pastor John Piper uses different wording but explains similar truths. “Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. ‘Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!’ (Ps 67:3-4).”

Expressed *Glory* Within and Across Cultures

Worship that reflects on and celebrates the finished work of Christ will be expressed in different languages, different musical and artistic styles, but the essential truths remain. The gospel is a universal call to respond to the finished work of Jesus. The redemption Christ provided on the cross is a non-negotiable historical truth. But as John Witvliet shared: “The perennial challenge of all Christians is to discern how a trans-cultural faith can be practiced faithfully in a contextually appropriate way.”

Ron Man’s article in *Worship Leader* magazine called “Worship Bridges” (September 2006) plowed good ground in this, using the concept of a suspension bridge. The unchanging biblical principles relate to the unmoving foundation pillars of the bridge. These truths, however, could be expressed via the rich diversity of culturally inflected manifestations. The suspension cable or span allows for a great deal of flexibility to expand and contract; this could represent the global worship arena, allowing for the heart language of the people to be considered when making decisions about forms, styles, music and other artistic expressions of faith. For instance, in China, Christians sing about God being the rice of life. In tropical islands, “whiter than snow” is stated with different analogies.


Glory from the Nations

From eternity past God has been a wedding planner, preparing for the Son a global wedding feast and grooming a glorious, multiethnic bride. This will be no small event to unveil, that moment when the bride, comprising the vast redeemed humanity of every tribe, language and people feasts at the wedding supper of the Lamb. The closing pages of Revelation identify the atmosphere of the wedding gathering as one of a glory exchange between bride and Bridegroom.





continued on page 30


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“The city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb...[A]nd they [all peoples] will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it” (Rev 21:23, 26 NAS). What is the glory and honor of the nations? Their redeemed cultural expressions.

So the call to declare His glory among the nations is a call to a wedding rehearsal, preparing the cultural sounds of the Bride that will be part of the endless dance at the wedding ball of eternity.

Breathtaking *Glory*

Here’s a Mongolian brushstroke from the global canvas. Paul Neeley arrived in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, to facilitate local musicians writing new scriptural songs. Mongolian believers at the time were not only young in the Lord but young in age. The Soviets were gone. New freedoms

for the song writing event to tap deeply into the Mongolian song styles. When he grasped where this was heading, he started showing up with a car-load of local instruments in his entourage. Neeley asked the musicians present to think about the ways that Mongolians used different melodies on different occasions. He then encouraged investing these song genres with biblical lyrics. The teams went to work. We were stunned to discover they use totally different ways of shaping poetry. Rather than rhyming the ends of phrases, they alliterate the opening sounds of phrases. Throughout the week, new lyrics were honed and grafted into traditional melodic forms adapted to the lyrics.

And then it happened—something breathtaking. A week later, at a new song concert, Pastor Dugermay and friends offered to the Lord Mongolian song forms

happening around the planet. The Summer Institute of Linguistics, Operation Mobilization and WEC International, and other agencies send out music and arts teams on these global worship sojourns.

Declare *Glory* through multicultural worship

While ethnic melodies are finding their way into some churches in North America, still many churches are hesitant, if not resistant, to the potential of enriching their worship through the inclusion of elements such as the Nigerian song with djembe drums at a Christmas celebration. So Roberta King has been at the forefront of exhorting churches to catch on and catch up. She describes the shortsightedness of North American churches in not adequately addressing the ever-changing cultural makeup of our congregations, calling it a 21st century version of cultural imperialism. With prophetic precision she shares how the use of culturally distinctive worship practices different from our own broadens and enriches our understanding of the breadth of God on a global scale.

However, engaging in multicultural worship in our churches is not for the fainthearted pastor or worship leader. Dr. King adds that it will require hard work, learning to understand other people’s cultural rites, songs, and prayers and how to adapt them into multicultural worship.

Notre Dame professor Mark Noll imagined what it would look like to sound out Psalm 150 multiculturally. With imagination and musical flare he paraphrased: “Praise him with syncopation and on the beat. Praise him with 5-tones (the Thai xylophone), 12-tones (most Western music), 24-tones (Arab music), and all scales in between. Praise him a cappella, with orchestra, and with drum set. Praise him with works of supernal intelligence and greatest simplification. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Together.”

Glory Now

Urban churches are experimenting and catching on using different ethnic sounds especially of ethnic groups represented in their congregations and/or communities. More research will be needed, but groups like the Mosaix Global Network have begun to track what works and does not work bringing multiracial and mul-

From eternity past God has been a wedding planner, preparing for the Son a global wedding feast and grooming a glorious, multiethnic Bride.

arrived. Church planters wisely moved in quickly. They brought with them what they had readily available—Western worship songs. More worship songs were needed for the fledgling churches. While the songwriting would yield more Western-oriented songs played with guitar, at least they would not be awkward translations from elsewhere.

On our way to an appointment Paul and I heard our host talk about a pastor/musician (the combo works very well anywhere on the planet) who had mastered Mongolian instruments and traditional Mongolian melodies. With urgency in his voice, Neeley abruptly told us we needed to visit the pastor. I countered that it was a good idea. For tomorrow. We were already late for our appointment. Paul insisted: “We need to get to him, NOW!” So the cab did the detour and we knocked on the door of Pastor Dugermay. We shared our desire

enriched with the words of eternal praise. Like the Nigerians in California hearing their heart music, the audience was ecstatic. It took effort to mine deeply into the rich cultural soil of a nation that experienced 75 years of Soviet domination caking it with foreign elements. It resulted in something new, yet familiar. These were fresh songs, but with a recognizable ring to them. The concert included something rarely used by believers—throat singing. While many of us thought it sounded strange for a voice to produce more than one pitch at the same time, to the locals it was a familiar and sweet sound. Repeated visits to Mongolia yielded more new song concerts. Neeley and I watched a movement of worship emerge. A worship makeover was happening. God raised up one prepared pastor-musician to ignite biblically appropriate and culturally relevant heart worship. Encouraging and facilitating song writing events has been

multicultural worship to North American churches. Some churches in other countries are much further along: Kensington Temple in Central London, for example, gathers worshippers from more than 90 nations to their services, and uses the rich tapestry of ethnic instruments and sounds in their worship.

No single style of music can achieve complete racial or ethnic diversity in congregations, although many North American urban churches discover that rock, funk, and gospel are good starting points, and more advanced teams can move into salsa and coros. This will challenge those with narrow tastes. For instance, entering authentically into a song from another continent might mean leaving behind the harmony and repetitive rhythm with which you are familiar in favor of unison singing with the accompaniment of a complex polyrhythm. Most of the time, short, call and response global songs are good starting points. Imitating rhythms using hand percussion instruments from a region can create the energy and excite-

ment of a global song. Many learn to use songs with short refrains. A soloist familiar with the language can sing the longer passages and have the congregation sing shorter repetitive passages of the refrain.

Many newer denominational hymnals now include global songs with both the original language and decent English translations. Several Christian world music publications are now available providing a smorgasbord of ethnic worship. (See the article on global song resources in the Toolbox of this issue). Some recent publications now include performance suggestions and provide CD or MP3 authentic accompaniments. A plethora of YouTube examples from every continent provides an inexpensive way to get educated with the global sounds of worship. The International Council of Ethnodoxologists has begun a series of seminars on moving a church into multicultural worship.

Forever *Glory*

The crescendo is building, the tempo quickening, moving steadily toward that

exhilarating moment when all redeemed humanity join the millions of angels expressing their devotion to the Triune God in His glory. It will involve the vast mosaic of all redeemed peoples using all their redeemed artistic expressions in an unending symphony declaring glory through eternity. **W**

Frank Fortunato serves as the International Music Director for Operation Mobilization, coordinating OM's Heart Sounds International, a ministry promoting indigenous worship through seminars, songwriting events, and recording of non-Western worship mostly in the restricted parts of the world.

More Online

There are many notes and resources that go with this article on worshipleader.com. Go there now to delve deeper into the subject of worship around the world.



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GLOBAL WORSHIP: What in the world can I do about it?



By Ron Man

What can the average North American worship leader glean from this issue's focus on global worship? Here are some reasonable suggestions:

1. Get Beneath the Surface

Recognize and champion the priority of substance over style. John Piper has pointed out: "There is no authorization in the New Testament for worship buildings, or worship dress, or worship times, or worship music, or worship liturgy or worship size or 35-minute sermons, or Advent poems or choirs or instruments or candles . . . Almost every worship tradition we have is culturally shaped rather than biblically commanded" (sermon, "Our High Priest Is the Son of God Perfect Forever," December 8, 1996). We need to realize that, because the New Testament does not spell out in detail what our worship should look like, God seems to be allowing for a diversity of biblically faithful and yet culturally inflected expressions of worship.

This affects how we look at what we are willing to do in our own church context, as well as how we look at what others are doing. The bottom line is that God is much, much more concerned about the hearts of his worshipers than about the matters of form and style on which we expend so much energy. To put it bluntly, God has no favorite songs or favorite styles! Rather, He rejoices in an infinite variety of worship expressions from His people (evident around the world, as well as down through the centuries), when lifted up with an attitude of thanksgiving and in dependence upon His Spirit. Let's not try to limit God or impose our own narrow tastes upon Him.

2. Use It

Take advantage of available materials. There is a wealth of songs and other worship materials now that reflect the wonderful diversity of the worldwide body of Christ (in the month of November, worshipleader.

com will be highlighting many of these).

3. Start Small

Take baby steps towards including multi-ethnic expressions. It is not productive (or conducive to job security!) to blow your congregation away with a radical overnight change of style. But there are times and ways when ethnic songs (even in other languages) can be introduced. A missions conference is an obvious time when global worship expressions can be uncontroversially incorporated. (In fact, we send a mixed message if we populate our missions conference services with only American and British missions songs!—yet this is not unusual in our churches.) As Frank Fortunato suggests in his article in this issue, reflect the national groups represented in your congregation or in your community.

4. Release Indigenous Poetry

Write new songs in your own congregation's "heart language." No songwriter knows the character, history, experience, joys, and struggles of a particular local congregation better than one who lives with that congregation! Encourage local creativity among musicians in your churches. "Indigenized" worship is not just for the foreign mission field.

5. Broaden the Horizon

Seek out opportunities to learn and serve. Exposure to global missions and to global and multi-ethnic worship has the inevitable effect of broadening one's horizons and helping us recognize that there are many, many legitimate ways to serve God and "do church."

Some Ways to Foster Growth:

Locally

Visit an ethnic congregation in your area; host a joint service with that church. Swap choirs or worship teams with that church for one Sunday. Learn songs from nations where your church has missionaries serving. Let ethnic members in your church

teach songs from their tradition to the church, the choir, or the worship team. Let internationals read Scripture in their mother tongue in your services, with the English also read, or printed or projected (Pentecost Sunday is an obvious time to try this!).

Globally

Seek out missions trips where you can contribute by teaching musical skills or teaching biblical principles, but beware of going to lead worship and simply importing your own style and songs, or teaching in a culturally prescriptive way (for example, teaching songwriting in such a way that insists that every Christian song "should" include two verses and a bridge). Go to observe and to learn and to encourage, more than to enlighten. *Heart Sounds International* (heart-sounds.org) sends teams overseas through the year to foster indigenous songwriting and recording. And the *Global Consultation on Music in Missions* (gcommhome.org) will have its next gathering in Singapore in July 2010.

Study

Avail yourselves of the resources and links available on such websites as that of the *International Council of Ethnodoxologists* (worldofworship.org) and *Worship Resources International* (worr.org).

Other Opportunities

The folks at ICE (info@worldofworship.org) and Mosaic (info@mosaic.org) would be happy to respond to requests for further information or guidance about opportunities for service here and abroad. ❧

Ron Man is the director of *Worship Resources International* (worr.org), a ministry focusing on teaching worldwide on the biblical foundations of worship. He is also a member of the *International Council of Ethnodoxologists* and serves as *Pastor of Worship/Missionary in Residence* at *First Evangelical Church* in Memphis, Tennessee. He edits the free online monthly newsletter *Worship Notes* (worr.org) and the worship quote blog *Quotables* (worr.wordpress.com).