

The Top 10 Reasons Every Church-planting Team Needs a Worship-arts Leader

By Dave Hall

Many evangelical Christians have a very truncated understanding of worship. When asked to define it, they respond, "Its singing, or its praising God." Worship, from a biblical perspective, is far more than merely singing or praising God in the assembly of the saints (as right and wonderful as that is). For years now I have collected definitions of the word. Dr. Bruce Leafblad penned one of the best I have found. I have expanded it slightly and hope that it will provide a framework for our understanding:

Worship is both a life lived and an event in which to participate. In and through worship, believers, by grace, center their lives (heart, soul, mind and strength) on the Lord, humbly glorifying God in response to His attributes, His acts, and His Word.

One might also ask, what is a worship-arts leader? This is someone who is uniquely gifted, called, and trained to lead the people of God into the presence of God. I incorporate the word "arts" into the role because, both historically and biblically, all the arts have played a major role in corporate worship. They should, therefore, continue to play a major role, especially in the cross-cultural church-planting context.

As missionaries and missions organizations dedicated to the task of establishing church-planting movements, our strategies and practices must be built on firm, biblical foundations. Much work remains to be done to better understand the implications of worship in regard to our theology and missiology. I humbly submit to you the top 10 reasons every church-planting team needs a worship-arts leader.

Every church-planting team needs a worship-arts leader because . . .

10. Every church should be a worshipping church.

Worshipping God is the believers highest calling. It is, as Dr. William Taylor has so aptly said, the mother of all paradigms. Worship expresses the reason for our redemption. In Exodus, we are told why God went to all the trouble to free his people from bondage. Let my people go . . . so that they may worship me" (Exod. 9:1, italics added). Worship will be either central to the planning and process of church planting or peripheral, one way or the other. We can't have it both ways.

9. Worshipping churches worship in the heart language of the people.

What is worship in a peoples "heart language"? It is culturally relevant worship that is intelligible to the people. It incorporates their music, their arts, and their means of expressing truth in their culture. Yes, great care must be taken to avoid syncretism. Contextualizing worship practices requires sound biblical and anthropological observation and application. Let us not allow, however, the learning curve to keep us from applying the biblical principle found in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25: Intelligible worship is much more apt to produce repentance than is unintelligible worship.

8. Worshipping in a people's heart language requires worship leadership.

You don't have to be in ministry for very long to realize the crucial role of well-trained, godly leadership. Facilitating the release of people from diverse cultures to worship in spirit and truth is both an art and a science.

I call it "ethnodoxology" (the study of how and why people of diverse cultures glorify the true and living God). Doing it well requires a well-trained, gifted worship-arts leader. I place the emphasis here on training as opposed to gifting because many church planting teams don't have someone gifted to lead in these matters. Ethnodoxology is, however, something that can be taught, caught, and implemented by those who have a heart for worship but feel they are not particularly musically or artistically endowed.

7. Worship leadership increases the effectiveness of both the church plant and the church planter.

We know from experience that shortly after a church is planted, one of the greatest needs is for gifted, trained worship leadership. Recognizing the need should help us to understand that biblical, creative, culturally relevant worship is essential to the effectiveness of the church in glorifying God both with our lives and our witness. One of the greatest challenges faced by the church planted in a cross-cultural setting is the lack of resource people to meet it. May God enable us to mobilize and empower worship-arts leadership for every team, both before and after they are sent to the field.

Not only do the churches we're planting need worship leaders, but our teams do as well. John Piper, in *Let The Nations Be Glad*, writes, "Missionaries will never call out, Let the nations be glad!, who cannot say from the heart, 'I rejoice in the Lord . . . I will be glad and exult in Thee' . . . Missions begins and ends in worship. Missionaries without this foundational understanding are living out too much of their missionary experience in a spiritual desert. One of the worship-arts leaders key roles is to facilitate and model both corporate and lifestyle worship with humility and servanthood, as a part of the team.

6. We are worshipers first, missionaries second.

We need a fundamental paradigm shift to occur in our understanding and practice of missions. Jesus said that God is seeking worshipers not people who know a lot about worship, not people who know how to worship, but worshipers. Being a worshiper is not something you do; it is something you are. Contrary to public opinion, God did not make us human doings; he made us human beings. In God's divine economy, we are worshipers first, moms second; worshipers first, husbands second; worshipers first, missionaries second."

5. Missionaries who are fired up about God will be more effective witnesses for his glory.

John Piper, in *Let the Nations Be Glad*, challenges our paradigm for ministry when he writes, "Missions exists because worship doesn't. . . . You can't commend what you don't cherish." Our evangelism and discipleship of the nations must flow out of our passion for God and his glory. Without this primary passion for God, our ministry will be shallow at best, or man-centered and self-glorifying at worst.

4. Culturally relevant musical and artistic worship is a powerful evangelistic tool inside and outside the church.

When unbelievers come into corporate worship that is in their heart language, they are much more open to hearing God's word. Their stereotypes of Jesus being the foreign God of a foreign religion, etc., are removed simply by relating the gospel and facilitating worship in culturally relevant forms. Showing interest in their music and arts validates them as a people and opens great opportunities for building relationships and sharing the gospel.

Cassette tapes and visual art forms that use Scripture and scriptural themes in culturally sensitive ways have found great favor even among Muslim groups adamantly opposed to the gospel.

3. The performing arts provide unique opportunities for evangelism.

A man working in Pakistan was taught the principle: You can say anything to a Muslim in poetry or music and he will listen; say the same thing in prose, and he may kill you. He decided to put the principle to the test by hosting an international music festival. A hall was rented and many groups played, including a national Christian music group that presented the gospel using indigenous Pakistani music and instruments. After the standing ovation at the conclusion, the mayor of the city announced, "This has been the finest musical event in the history of our town, and I feel it should be repeated every year!"

2. The performing arts provide unique opportunities for creative access.

One of PIONEERS missionaries learned to sing in the style of the people she is attempting to reach with the gospel. This opened up an opportunity to record. She is now nationally known and has many opportunities to sensitively share her faith. This national notoriety also gives her negotiating power when it comes time to renew visas. In addition, studying the music and arts of a people is another excellent means of entry into closed countries, and it provides practical benefits to developing indigenous forms of worship.

1. The battle against the enemy is won in worship.

Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: 'Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.' As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir. . . (2 Chron. 20:21-22). There is something inherently combative about worship; namely, the enemy hates it. Worship is warfare, pure and simple. In our battle to see the unreached reached, to see worshipers brought to Christ from every tribe, tongue, people, and language, we would do well to use one of our most powerful weapons . . . worship.

Dave Hall, M. Div., is founder of Worship From the Nations (WFN), a ministry of the international movement of PIONEERS. The purpose of WFN is to spread a passion for the glory of God among all peoples. He, his wife Sarah and their five children live near Budapest, Hungary where they are training nationals and church planters in worship. He can be reached at Davehallwtn@Compuserve.com.

This article was published by EMQ, April, 2000. The author updated it in March, 2001.