

A Glorious Pursuit

Reflections on God's passion for worshipers from all peoples.

--Steve Hoke

My life as a worshiper was changed at Urbana '76 when I heard Edmund Clowney preach the punch line from Psalm 96 as "Our International Anthem." "When we worship God as we ought," Clowney declared, "that's when the nations listen." I was riveted to the cold fiberglass seat in the Urbana Assembly Hall as a first-year seminarian. Having grown up in missions, I had never before seen any connection between worship and missions. For the next 15 years I was on a mission to discover all the evidence I could that worship and mission were inextricably linked.

No theologian makes the connection between mission and worship clearer than John Piper when he states: "Missions is not the ultimate purpose of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't" (*Let the Nations Be Glad*). No missiologist expands that doxological theme better than Steve Hawthorne in his classic *Perspectives* text article, "The Story of His Glory." It was this article, when it first appeared in *Mission Frontiers* in 1987, that connected the dots of the various characters and stories throughout the Old Testament. It was Hawthorne's literary analysis that helped me detect the true plot line of Scripture--God is drawing true worshipers from every tribe and people to worship Him before the throne, there to accept glory from all the peoples on earth. The *Perspectives* course has now helped thousands see the big picture afresh--Scripture and church history are the story of His Glory--God bringing glory to Himself. It's not so much about our missions effort at finishing the task; it's all about God receiving glory from His creatures.

Yet, few other missiologists or theologians in recent years have added much to our understanding of the link between evangelism and mission and worship. So, it was with some anticipation that I tromped through the bone-chilling snow of Urbana 2000 to learn just how "Worship becomes mission ."

Urbana 2000 was different than other Urbana conventions. Significantly different. It was not about us, and all we have *to do* to complete the Great Commission in our generation. This Urbana was not so much about the unfinished task. This Urbana was about worship becoming mission, and how becoming active in God's mission can become the best act of worship!

At Urbana 2000 corporate worship moved to center stage. The emphasis was clearly on binding our lives with the Lord of the Universe by praise and adoration. Almost half of the plenary sessions, both morning and evening, were devoted to worship by the reading of scripture and singing. Students were obviously caught up in the spirit of vibrant contemporary praise.

Urbana Director Barney Ford set the table early for a worship feast: "Urbana 2000" he announced the first evening, "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.'" Before taking the position of Director of Urbana Barney had read Psalm 103 every day for seven months. He explained how he came to share the conviction of King David to call out to people everywhere to honor God as the One whose Kingdom rules over all. Because of David's boldness to call the world to worship God, Barney realized that God is on a mission and its goal is worship. God is so good that He doesn't want anyone to miss the best love, the deepest joy, the greatest life, all found in Him.

I learned 15 insights about worship as I sang with the plenary sessions, listened in workshops and interacted with dozens of participants.

Fifteen Lessons About Worship and the World

1. First, God initiates worship--and He's getting it. Since the beginning of the story, God has purposed that all peoples worship. "Praise the Lord, all you nations; Extol him, all you peoples. For great is His steadfast love toward us, [And the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord]" (Psalm 117). The videos and stories of Urbana demonstrated how worship is growing around the world. What a joy it is to recognize we are part of the nearly-assembled family of all peoples.

2. Practicing Biblical worship can help to integrate our lives with God's character and to align our lives around God's mission. Worship leads people to respond by joining God in mission. One of the secrets of this story is that God is on a mission--always has been and continues to be. Worship is an activity by which God can draw people into mission, give them a part in the mission, and call them to respond with everything they are and will be.

I observed thousands of students beginning to make this mysterious connection for the first time. Urbana did not flood participants with statistics of world need and stories of unreached peoples. But I saw and talked to many who were overwhelmed by the realization that the Almighty God was inviting them to join with Him in the cause that is closest to His heart--winning worshipers from every tribe and nation.

3. Praise and proclamation of the Gospel (through word, deeds and power) are all acts of worship. Scripture came alive for me. Worship leads to mission, proclamation follows praise: "Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name; make known His deeds among the peoples. Sing to Him, sing praises to Him; tell of all His wonderful works." I Chronicles 16:8-9 (NRSV) Worship leader Sundee Frazier described how worship motivates mission:

If God is love, how can we leave worship times unmoved by the plight of those who don't know His love? After spending an hour a morning in God's presence, how can we not tell our family, our friends, or future friends, about Jesus? True worship, then, should motivate me to share the love of Jesus just as I have experienced it in worship.

4. A life of worship means dependence upon our object of worship. Worship demands the giving of our entire selves in submission to God--heart, soul and mind. Paul called for the living sacrifice of our entire body--all of us. Therefore, true worship is impossible until the control of one's wallet is given to God. You cannot serve two masters.

Barney Ford painted this graphic analogy: "When God adopted us, He gave us the family business: world missions, the business closest to His heart, the business to which He gave His life--His only Son. So, who wants to be a millionaire?"

5. Worship creates a context in which I am able to see myself anew, under the reflection of God's pure holiness. Isaiah's response to God's holiness only illustrates this point--when we see God "high and lifted up," we see how "low down" we really are. Further, true worship is the true context in which I find my true identity, not in the false culture of consumerism that hawks superficial identity.

Worship creates a 'safe-place' environment in which God's Holy Spirit can do spiritual reconstructive surgery, transplants, or healing. Worship transforms our minds and allows us to hear God's voice in ways we miss amidst the cacophony of our culture-driven lives.

6. Only worship helps create, establish, and maintain a praise-centered worldview: seeing the Lion-Lamb on the throne, sovereignly in charge. A worship worldview sees the Holy Spirit at work around the world, completing the big picture of world evangelization--transforming all of creation into its original and intended wholeness. Only through worship do we gain that perspective, and only through worship do we maintain that vantage point, and ultimately enter into that reality.

7. Worship is a preview of coming attractions--a foretaste of glory, "the closest thing to a heavenly experience anywhere on earth. Yet God doesn't want our experience at Urbana to be an every three year experience," said Barney Ford. The experience of energizing worship needs to be our daily staple and sustenance.

8. Worship is ultimately a world-sized affair. Most students, no matter how big their church, have never been in synchronous, vibrant, amplified, contemporary praise with thousands of other ecstatic worshipers. To experience God in that setting, is a giant leap into craving God-sized worship. It was truly thrilling to see yet another generation of Urbana attendees discover the mind-boggling wonder of worshipping with over 18,000 multi-ethnic worshippers from over 60 nations.

9. God touches people through worship. Whether in our quiet time in the Chicago suburbs, or in the stress of a short-term in China, the Holy Spirit of God touches the deepest emotions of our hearts when we see pre-believers hear or experience Christian worship. It is in genuine, vibrant Christian worship that the agnostic or atheist can feel God's love and acceptance, the unity of believers, and their hearts soften. Worship creates space in which God works. It is that moment in life in which we most readily release Him to be Himself. It is in worship that our hearts are drawn to God.

10. Worship bridges language and cultural barriers, because true worship is a supra-cultural experience of our supra-cultural God's glory. Worship helps strip us of our North American cultural outerwear of capitalism, democracy and materialism and brings us into the throne room of God, clothed in His righteousness and glory! Worship not only crosses borders, it exceeds and demolishes human boundaries and divisions. True worship is above cultures because it focuses our praise on our God--"For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; He is to be feared above all gods" (Psa. 96:4).

11. Worship is developmental. We grow in worship, over time, with different people, as we experience diverse styles, forms and music genre. As every people has their own worship, so each generation develops its own genre and forms of worship. Yet not every young worshiper appreciates the music of the ages, the liturgies of some denominations, or the boundaries that our histories have established. But worship has a way of changing us and immersing us into the deepening flood of what the Spirit is doing to water His people around the world.

12. In worship we are reminded of God's cosmic cause to draw worshipers from every people group--over 27,500 distinct people groups worldwide. Isaiah prophesied that God's salvation was for others beyond Israel, and that His holy temple would be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7). When we worship we should always be reminded of who's missing from the international worship service (Revelation 7:9-10).

13. Worship embraces us in the mystery of the breaking of the seven seals (Rev. 5-8). Worship at times will be so totally overwhelming that we will "feel" out-of-control. That can either be exhilarating or frightening. Exhilarating--to experience the mystery and wonder of God; frightening--if we fear not being in control. Exhilarating to be serving as partners with the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the seals of ultimate global judgment; frightening if our hearts are not in sync with his songs and rhythms.

14. God's global mission becomes global worship. Any hope we have that the nations will gather in worship, is a hope that comes from knowing the end of the story. From Genesis to Revelation, the author of Scripture tells us how and shows us when God draws peoples from every tribe and nation to worship Him in glorious praise. Starting with Abram's building his first altar of worship at Shechem in Genesis 12:7, through to Jesus' commissioning of the apostles to disciple the nations in Matthew 28:18-20, God's desire to receive glory from all peoples has been clear. The end of the story--the 17 worship scenes we witness in Revelation 5-19, reveals how the ultimate international worship service will bring the history-long story of God's mission to a glorious crescendo. Worship prepares us "now, to live the life."

15. If the Kingdom of God is a party, as Tony Campolo likes to say, then worship is the best relationally dynamic way to offer invitations to people who have yet to hear of God's forever party. It is God's ordained means of inviting others into the banquet feast of the Lamb, into the shalom of God, into the jubilee God intends. In fact, when we get worship right, that's when the emerging generations of young people around the world will listen.

You probably know someone who went to Urbana 2000. Join me in watching these 19,000 worshipers discover their place in singing a new song of worship and proclaiming God's mighty works among the yet unworshipping nations.

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