

The Church as a Doxological Community: Worship and Chin Immigrant Churches

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Introduction

According to a recent research done by the Burmese American Community Institute (BACI), the total number of Burmese refugees resettled in the US have reached 169,949. This consists of Karen 71,353 (42%), Chin 59,679 (35%), Karenni (Kayah) 12,490 (7%), Burman 5,878 (4%), Kachin 3,916 (2%), Arakanese 2,531 (2%), Mon 2,261 (1%), Shan 1,212 (1%), and others 10,629 (6%).¹ As these Burmese immigrants are establishing their own ethnic churches in the U.S., they are facing issues in many areas. One of the issues they are dealing with, as they are adjusting to a new context, is the issue of using music in their worship. This paper is based on a research I conducted among Chin immigrant churches for my doctoral dissertation.²

The Chin people are religious and worshipful people. As they are resettling in a new context, the way they worship seems to gradually change—especially in their use of music. Using contemporary Christian music in worship emerges as a new phenomenon, which tends to become a new identity for Chin younger generations. For many of the first-generation, however, using the traditional hymn is an integral part of their identity. This shows the fact that Chin immigrant churches are still in search of their worship identity, and apparently, they are encountered with conflict in their worship. This paper addresses this issue and attempts to highlight a way to reconcile the above two groups.

Christian Worship: A Theological Perspective

What is Christian worship? According to Donald Bloesch, the church is a “worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second.”³ In fact, Christian worship is essentially an act of praise and adoration to God who embraces and redeems humankind. The term “doxology” is used to describe the way Chin immigrant churches worship and express their praise to God. The word is derived from the Greek words *doxa* (glory) and *logia* (word), which simply means an expression of praise to God.⁴ Hence, worship means to glorify and praise God

¹ This data is taken from the BACI’s facebook post on August 2, 2017: “2017 BACI Research Report,” https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1398526830202930&id=181038735285085 (accessed August 29, 2017). The BACI is an Indiana-based non-profit organization established in 2011 in order to “proactively respond to the growing needs of the Burmese refugee population in central Indiana” by providing social services, educational and vocational support to the Burmese in greater Indianapolis. See <https://thebaci.org/about-us/overview/> (accessed August 29, 2017).

² Hrang Hlei, “The Formation of Chin Immigrant Congregations in the United States: Discovering their Ecclesiological Identities” (St. Paul, MN: Unpublished PhD Dissertation, 2015).

³ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 117.

⁴ Arlo D. Duba, “Doxology,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. S. J. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 365.

for what God has done for us; it is about praise and thanksgiving to God who redeemed us through Jesus Christ. Many of the Chin immigrant churches have reflected this concept in their worship and adopted a praise team in each congregation.

My research shows that many of the Chin immigrant churches are greatly influenced by contemporary Christian worship, which is about “a style of worship that focuses on the culturally accessible and relevant use of contemporary music and technologies for the purpose of outreach to those who are disenchanted with the traditional styles of worship.”⁵ As Tim Wright explains, Contemporary worship seeks to communicate the gospel in current, up-to-date language.... Rather than selecting music from centuries past, contemporary worship presents the gospel by using the styles of music that resonate with popular culture. At its heart, contemporary worship is the attempt to relate to God and praise God in the language of the people.⁶ For Pastor Micah, using the styles of music that resonate with popular culture and relating to and praising God in the language of the people is the best way to attract the Chin young people and to bring them to church. He states that the traditional hymns have little impact to the lives of the younger Chin generation. In fact, he argues, most of the hymns used in the church are more than 200 years old, which have become foreign to many Chin youth. Thus, he explains, “We started *praise* and *worship* teams in our church to sing contemporary songs that are familiar to our youth.”⁷ This view is shared by many Chin churches in the U.S. today.

Many of the Chin people tend to understand worship from an individual perspective, rather than from a communal perspective. In other words, most of them tend to understand worship within a personal spiritual aspect. Understanding worship in this way tends to lead them to focusing primarily on the importance of entertainment and self-satisfaction. Hence, the notion that worship is to glorify and praise God is overshadowed by the human entertainment and performance. The contemporary Christian music has a big influence on the Chin churches in which much attention is given to the praise of God. The real motivation, however, tends to be what Bloesch calls “egocentric—the satisfaction of the heart’s desire.”⁸

Bloesch bluntly describes the characteristic of contemporary Christian worship as “an excessive individualism,” the core paradigm of which is “the solitary individual union with God.”⁹ Contemporary Christian worship focuses on “cultivating intimacy with God,” rather than on “the story of salvation.” Moreover, the search for “ecstasy takes precedence over the cost of discipleship” in its worship.¹⁰ Bloesch further states that the focus of “contemporary worship is not on content but on method. The aim is to create the right mood rather than to teach revealed truth.”¹¹ In other words, it focuses on feeling rather than the word of God itself. Problems usually occur, as Harper and Metzger observe, “when worship forms are focused on meeting people’s ‘felt needs.’”¹² There is nothing wrong about focusing on people’s felt needs. However, “the role

⁵ Daniel T. Benedict and Craig Kennet Miller, *Contemporary Worship for the 21st Century* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1994), 23.

⁶ Tim Wright, “Defining Contemporary Worship,” in *Contemporary Worship: A Source Book for Spirited-Traditional, Praise and Seeker Services*, ed. Tim Wright and Jan Wright (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 23-24.

⁷ A journal note from the researcher’s conversation with Pastor Micah on October 20, 2012.

⁸ Bloesch, *The Church*, 137.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 138.

¹¹ Ibid., 137.

¹² Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 117.

of the church in worship is not to meet felt needs, but to show people that their real needs go deeper.”¹³ Genuine worship is not simply about fulfilling the worshippers’ felt needs; it is about confronting them with the triune God, whose presence is not always so comfortable.¹⁴

Marva J. Dawn compares contemporary Christian worship with candy, which tastes good but is not good for health. She simply states that “candy is very popular with children, but we wouldn’t feed them only candy if we want them to grow strong and healthy.”¹⁵ Dawn argues that contemporary music should not be used in worship simply to attract people. But she laments that many churches tend to confuse praise with happiness, which leads many worship leaders and participants to think that “to praise God is simply to sing upbeat music; consequently, many songs that are called ‘praise’ actually describe the feelings of the believer rather than the character of God.” She points out that “genuine praise does not express our own yearnings or wishes; it responds to something given to us.”¹⁶

Christian Worship: A Missional Perspective

There are two camps of worship groups within the Chin immigrant churches: the adult group (first generations) and the youth group (1.5 generations). The former group tends to hold on to their traditional worship, which they brought along from Myanmar. The traditional worship goes along with hymn singing and being quiet during the worship service. Unlike the former group, the youth group are more interested in contemporary Christian worship, which is mostly expressed through loud music. My research shows that there is an obvious tension between these two camps that needs to be reconciled.

Understanding worship from a missional perspective will help these two groups to be reconciled. For Harper and Metzger, missional worship begins with “the community of the Father, Son, and Spirit, which calls the church into worship as participation in the divine life.”¹⁷ This shows the concept of a horizontal and holistic nature of the existence of a church. In this regard, as Van Gelder and Zscheile posit, Christian worship is not “merely a gathering of private individuals who seek an intimate experience of the divine; rather, it is a public work (*leiturgia*) in which we participate with God.”¹⁸ The following two concepts are presented as possible guidelines to be discussed. They are: missional worship and worship as public witness.

Missional Worship

As mentioned earlier, there is a strong sense of contemporary Christian worship—especially among the Chin youth—which tends to focus more on entertainment. Worship is not simply for personal satisfaction; it is meant to express the communal identity of the church. The challenge here is that every worship service must be designed with the whole congregation in mind, not just an elite group of worship leaders entertaining the rest of worship participants. Genuine worship should be communal as well as missional.

Worship in the Bible is communal because it is the worship of the people of God. Harper and Metzger view worship as communal “in both vertical and horizontal senses,” asserting that it

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching out without Dumping Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 167.

¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹⁷ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 87.

¹⁸ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 152.

is “a participation in one another’s lives as well as in the life of God.”¹⁹ Further, they argue that communal worship is dialogical in its nature. They state, “Worship is not simply a group of people proclaiming God’s worth to him as he engages them by the Spirit, but it is also believers proclaiming God’s glory to one another.... Worship is not meant to be a corporate collection of individuals all facing the same direction with closed eyes, as if the only persons in the room were the individual and God. No, in worship we speak to one another as well as to God. We rejoice in God by rejoicing *with* one another. Only then is worship truly a community celebration of the person and work of God.”²⁰

The dialogical aspect of worship reflects the communal and missional nature of it. In fact, worship is not just about music, as many Chin younger generations tend to define it. Worship is missional in the sense that it proclaims the Word of God and practices Eucharist and Baptism. It is in worship that the mission of God is fully expressed through the work of the Spirit.

In this case, worship and mission are correlated. As J. G. Davies rightly explains, worship and mission are not to be conceived as two distinctive activities; they are “aspects of a single divine activity in which, through Christ, we are included.” As he further explains, “mission is essentially an activity of the triune God” in which the whole congregation is called to participate.²¹ For Frank C. Senn, “worship is itself an aspect of the mission of God.”²² By definition, as Guder asserts, the church is “a public assembly, and its worship is its first form of mission.... The reality of God that is proclaimed in worship is to be announced to and for the entire world.”²³

Thomas H. Schattauer’s three approaches to the relationship between worship and mission is worth to mention here. They are: inside and out, outside in, and inside out. Speaking of the first approach, Schattauer asserts that worship serves the purpose of mission, meaning it “spiritually empowers those inside the church” to take the “church’s mission in the outside world.”²⁴ In this case, believers come to worship in order to charge their spiritual battery and go out to do mission in the outside world. In this approach, worship and mission remain distinct activities within the church’s life—inside and out. The second approach focuses on bringing “the ‘outside’ activities of mission directly into the context of worship.”²⁵ Worship, in this approach, has become a platform from which “to present the gospel and reach out the unchurched” and “to issue the call to serve the neighbor and rally commitment for social and political action.”²⁶ In this case, worship is “reshaped to take up the tasks of the church’s mission, construed as evangelical outreach, social transformation, or both.”²⁷ The tasks of mission become the primary purpose of worship—outside in.

The third approach, which Schattauer prefers, locates worship within the larger scope of God’s reconciling mission toward the whole world (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). He asserts that the

¹⁹ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

²¹ J. G. Davies, *Worship and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 71.

²² Frank C. Senn, *The Witness of the Worshipping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 5.

²³ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 243.

²⁴ Thomas H. Schattauer, “Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission,” in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

gathering of a people to witness to and participate in this reconciling act of God is an integral part of God's mission. The visible act and forms of worship, in this approach, have become a clear enactment of God's reconciling mission. He states that the relationship between worship and mission is not instrumental. Rather, the act of worship is mission. Hence, worship is "the visible locus of God's reconciling mission toward the world."²⁸

Many Protestant churches, including Chin immigrant churches, are influenced by the first two approaches, which view worship as either a battery charger or a platform from which the gospel is proclaimed. In my observation, these two approaches tend to promote music in worship in order to motivate the participants for the mission of the church. This type of worship is more entertaining and individualistic, rather than communal and missional.

Missional worship always puts God at the center over the styles and music. Reflecting on the relation between worship and mission, Van Gelder and Zscheile assert, "Worship is not merely an instrumental opportunity to present the gospel to seekers, to teach believers, or to administer sacraments; rather, it is the public practice in which we show forth who we are in and with God. In Word and sacrament, we are nourished and renewed in order to be sent forth in service and mission, to live lives of sacrificed witness to God. The gathering movement of worship is complemented by a sending movement into the world. In the Eucharist, we experience a foretaste of the communion that is our destiny as God's redeemed people."²⁹ Viewing worship as an instrumental opportunity to proclaim the gospel can easily lead the church to narrowly focus on "meeting people's 'felt needs,'" as Harper and Metzger assert.³⁰ The desire to meet the individual's felt need usually leads the worship of the church to focus on spiritual entertainment and satisfying each individual's desires. Thus, the view that worship is the communal practice through which the participants express who they are in and with God tends to disappear. Put differently, the communal identity as God's redeemed people seems to be less important when the church narrowly focuses on style and method over its worship content. Missional worship nourishes, renews, and reshapes participants to live lives of sacrificed witness to God, as stated by Van Gelder and Zscheile above.

Worship as Public Witness

In his book *Why Church Matters*, Jonathan Wilson posits that the triune God, not the congregation, is the audience to whom we address our praise in worship.³¹ Wilson argues that the work of worship itself is witness, because "in worship we are called to declare who God is, who we are before God, and how we are related to the rest of creation."³² In his final appearance, Jesus assured the disciples that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit; and they will be his *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). In the same way, we are called to be *witnesses* to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and to the reign of God; we are called to proclaim this good news to the world. In fact, the primary purpose of the church is to proclaim the reconciling work of the triune God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The notion that worship as public witness is reflected in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. As mentioned already, worship and mission are two aspects of a single activity of the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 152-53.

³⁰ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 117.

³¹ Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry, and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 32.

³² Ibid.

triune God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Davies posits that the true worship of the triune God has been disclosed in Christ's action. In other words, what Christians have to do in response to God has been accomplished by Christ in his earthly ministry.³³ The ministry of Jesus may be summed up into one simple word with a deep theological meaning: service. In fact, Jesus told his disciples: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Since in Christ the true worship and mission of God are revealed, the church's worship and mission involve participation in Christ.

The Lord's Supper (or Eucharist) is an essential element in Christian worship, which is worth looking at and discuss how it is related to and reflected in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. According to Ross Hastings,

The Lord's Supper is the very essence of the gospel, which is the very essence of our mission! It conveys the image of Jesus standing with scars in his hands and side. It is the symbol of his presence as the scarred One in our midst, the sacrament that reminds us of his wounds. The church is only beautiful when the beautiful scars of Jesus are front and center.³⁴

The bread and wine in the Lord's Supper represent the blood and broken body of Jesus, which is a reminder of his life, ministry, and redemptive act on the cross. Hence, taking the bread and wine is an act of participation in Christ's body and blood and submitting one's life to follow his footsteps (1 Corinthians 10:25-27). Following Jesus means to deny one self and take up the cross in one's daily life (Matthew 16:24-26). The whole ministry of Jesus may be described in terms of caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming the strangers, and defending the marginalized (Matthew 25:31f). The point is that worship is not simply for the spiritual benefits of individual believers, as the worship of the Chin churches tends to imply. Rather, it is a reminder for the church as a whole to stand for the marginalized in society, to witness to God's love, and to serve others.

Shirley C. Guthrie asserts that in the Lord's Supper, we are spiritually fed, nourished, and given new life, which in turn empowers us to be a community of people who are agents of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.³⁵ Guthrie states:

This Christ is at work in the world to feed, nourish, and bring new life to people who are desperately hungry—hungry for bread to fill bellies, hungry for forgiveness and acceptance, hungry for new beginnings and fresh starts, hungry for justice, hungry for a God who cares.³⁶

Guthrie touches the very point of worship as public witness here. The bread and wine in the Lord's Supper are outer signs of the inner essence, which are the Christian covenant of love and sacrifice. The covenant has an outward symbol and an inward reality. That reality is the church's covenant of love, unity, service, and commitment. Thus, observing the Lord's Supper has to be a remembrance of the vicarious acts of Jesus in the past. By participating in this act, "we put on Christ—a dying, rising, and glorified Christ—and we carry this Christ with us into our daily life and work."³⁷ In this regard, the Lord's Supper is the reminding action in which we are sharing the same care and love for people for whom Christ has died. By partaking of the Lord's Supper, we acknowledge that we are participating in the suffering of Christ and therefore, in the suffering of the people.

³³ Davies, *Worship and Mission*, 71.

³⁴ Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 200-201.

³⁵ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 358.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Rembert G. Weakland, "Liturgy," in *Liturgy: Active Participation in the Divine Life*, ed. James P. Moroney (Collegville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 87.

Baptism is another essential element in Christian worship, which represents the dying and rising with Christ. Paul, in Romans 6:3-4, stated:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Baptism “is the practice of the church that initiates a life of discipleship.”³⁸ It was first demonstrated by Jesus as a mark of recognition of his identity and mission. Jesus began his ministry after his baptism. As the gospels mention, Jesus’ ministry can be divided into three main functions: teaching, healing, and proclaiming the Word of God. For believers, baptism is communion with Jesus Christ and participation in his death and resurrection. If baptism is the foundation of the church, the Lord’s Supper is the heart, the very being of the church. The Lord’s Supper is the communion with and within the body of Christ. It is the *koinonia* in a twofold sense: participation in the body of Christ and participation in the community of those who participate in Christ’s body (Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 10:16).

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned earlier, there is conflict between the adult and younger generation Chin immigrants in their attempt to search for a worship identity. The former group seems to find their worship identity in the hymn singing, whereas the latter group discovers it in the contemporary Christian music. In my observation, both groups tend to view worship from what Schattauer calls the “inside and out” and “outside in” approach, which main emphasis tends to be spiritual entertainment and battery charging that energizes an individual to do mission on behalf of God in the world—inside and out. The goal of worship, in this case, has become doing mission by way of persuading people into the church—outside in. These two approaches tend to neglect the third approach—inside out, which primary focus is to bring worship into a larger scope of God’s reconciling mission in the world. In other words, the goal of worship should be a clear enactment of God’s reconciling mission toward the whole world.

My research findings also indicate that many of the Chin people tend to understand worship in terms of the music performed, prayers offered, and preaching delivered during the Sunday service. Other important worship elements such as Baptism and the Lord’s Supper appear to be regarded simply as ways to have a vertical relationship with God. The concept of worship as public witness in the sense that there is a correlation between worship and public life is still to be developed among the Chin immigrant churches.

³⁸ Wilson, *Why Church Matters*, 104.