

“Worship Is Missional”
Sermon Series on *Worship Is!* #3
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
(Acts 2:42-47)
January 25, 2015

Introduction.



What are your predictions for 2015? What hopes and dreams to you have for the New Year? And how often have your predictions or what you thought your life was going to be like have actually come true?

Last Monday night, Rick Wesley, who is an elder in our church, shared the following with us during the time of devotion and reflection which began our Session meeting. He said, “I’m consistently amazed that as sophisticated and informed as we westerners think we

are, we can't predict anything – the weather, the stock market, even the price of gas.

‘Oh, for the 'gift of prophesy!’”

He continued, “When we (as a Session) first met last year (in 2014) who here would have predicted the rise of ISIS, the Russian acquisition of Crimea, First Presbyterian leaving the PCUSA, a Republican election landslide, an intrepid Pope who is serious about making Catholicism relevant again, or Ebola? The list is endless.

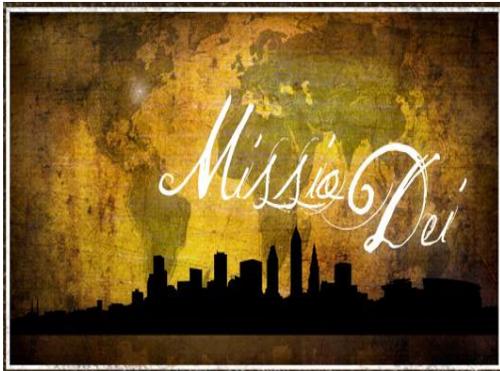
“And what about predictions for this year? Already, who in their wildest dreams would have thought that the term ‘inter-religious re-imagining’ would be used to justify a Muslim call to prayer from the bell tower in the chapel at Duke University?”



Security of Significance?

“After a seminal 2013 and 2014 here at First Pres, what would you predict for us this year? Will it be a year of ‘security,’ where we rest and do safe things, or will it be a year of ‘significance?’ Security or Significance? To which is God calling us in this New Year?”

Rick concluded his devotion by saying, “Our God is a God of history. He is a paradoxical God, but He is always at work. Jesus came with a mission, as we have seen in our study of the Book of Acts, and He gives the church a mission, too. Frankly, I marvel that God lets us in on it.”



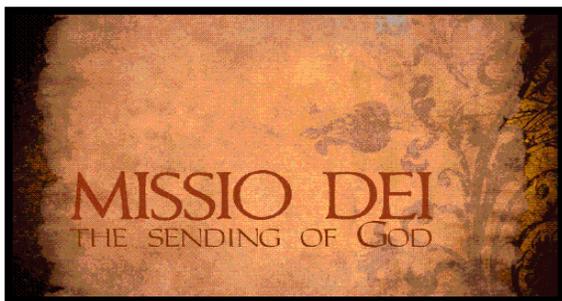
What a great beginning to our Session meeting Rick’s devotion was. It framed our time together so well, because it reminded us that everything the church is supposed to be about is the mission of God – the *missio Dei*. I love it when elders are Christ-centered, biblically based, and mission minded. It’s one of the reasons I love this church so much.

We’re in the middle of a sermon series on the subject of worship, and this morning we consider the notion that even our worship is supposed to be

Missional. As we think about these matters today, there are three questions I want to ask and answer. 1) What does the word “missional” mean? 2) How is worship supposed to be missional? And 3) what are the implications for our worship today?

I. What Does the Word “Missional” Mean?

You’ve heard many of us in leadership use the word “missional” from time to time in the last few years, but what does it really mean? Is it just another buzz word, or a way to talk about missions, like our work overseas in the DR and Haiti, or our ministry to the homeless here in Winston-Salem? I hope the explanation I give you today will help clarify some misconceptions and provide a clearer understanding of what we’re really talking about.



Missiologist and author Alan Hirsh, who spoke at the ECO conference last summer, says¹ that a proper understanding of the word “missional” begins with a recovery of a missionary understanding of God. By His very nature, God is apostolic, which means that He is “one who is sent.” God is the one who took the initiative to redeem the world after we made a

mess of things. This doctrine, known as the *missio Dei* – the sending of God – has caused many people in recent years to rethink their understanding of what the church is supposed to be all about, because if we are to be the “sent people of God” then the church is the embodiment of God’s mission in the world.

Throughout history, and for a long time in this country, many people have seen it the other way around. They believed mission was an *instrument* of the church, a means by which the church could grow. Although we may on occasion say, “The church has a mission,” according to the missional way of thinking the more correct statement would be “the mission has a church.” Do you see the difference?

As western culture has become increasingly post-Christian in recent years, the attractional model, as it is known, which has dominated the way most churches have carried on their ministries in the past, is losing its effectiveness. The West now looks more like a cross-cultural missionary context than ever before, and in this new day the attractional church model has experienced a significant decline.

So you see the word *missional* represents an important shift in the way we think about the church. As the people of a missionary God, our goal is to engage the world the same way He did—by *going out* rather than just *drawing in*. And when the church makes mission its organizing principle, then it is the true church God intended it to be from the beginning.

II. How Is Worship Supposed to be Missional?

One of the theses of this sermon series is that in this post-Christian, post-modern world of ours, the dynamics of being the church have changed and we need to become more missional. Christianity no longer has the “home field” advantage in our culture, and we’re a minority voice in society. The claims of Jesus and the teachings of Christianity have been pushed to the sidelines in the marketplace of ideas, and as a result we need to rethink our strategy in order to be effective.

In many ways, we have more in common today with believers in the 1st century AD than we do with the followers of Christ here in America back in the 1950s. In the first few centuries of the history of the Church, Christianity was a minority voice which was also pushed to the margins of society. Believers were often persecuted for their faith, and at times they were made to be scapegoats for the problems in a community, like with the burning of Rome in 64 AD. Therefore, we can learn a great deal from the early church about how to be effective in ministry, mission, and worship when Christianity isn’t widely accepted or embraced by society.

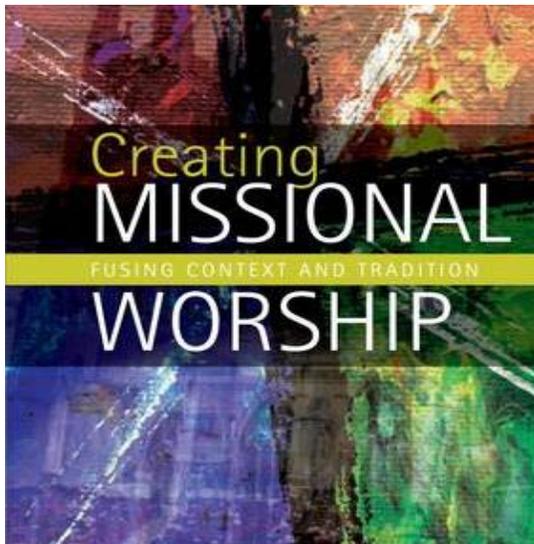
In Acts 2, and later in chapter 3, we read about the worship life of the early church. There we see that the first believers met together on a regular basis in the Jewish Temple for worship. We also read that these early Christians met together in homes in addition to the Temple (2:46), and here we see the first indication of the formation of what were known as house churches. In addition, we read a reference to “the breaking of bread” which scholars believe is an allusion to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

When persecution began of the early church, they were forced to go underground and gather for worship in secret. They used the Roman catacombs, a series of underground cemeteries which had galleries or passages with side compartments for tombs. There they would come together in secret to celebrate the Lord's Supper and worship God. Not much is known about the order of worship or how long the sermon was or even what songs they sang. But we do know that they gathered together at the risk of their lives in order to worship with other Christians. It was that important to them.

Gradually, as the Gospel extended beyond the Jews to Greeks through the ministry of the apostle Paul and others, people of a non-Jewish background began to embrace the gospel too. As they did, the church began to take on a multi-cultural flavor. No doubt, their worship was affected as well, and the early Jewish roots gave way to include Greek and Roman influences. In Ephesians 5, Paul even refers to the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Here we see the full range of Christian music which was expressed by the earliest believers.

A reading of the New Testament reveals that there was a great deal of emphasis on worship in the early church. They made it a priority, even when it wasn't convenient, and even if it was dangerous. We also note that as the gospel extended beyond its Jewish roots into the Greco-Roman world, a transition began to take place from a Jewish orientation to an indigenous multi-cultural expression with Greek and Roman influences. Worship evolved and changed over time in the early church, and it began to take on different expressions in the various cultural contexts.

III. What Are the Implications for our Worship Today?



What does all this mean for you and me? In what ways must our worship be adaptive so that it can remain effective and relevant in this changing world of ours while never compromising its theological integrity? There are four principles I would like to share with you which I believe should guide our worship experiences in this new day of being a missional church at First Pres.

First, no matter what the context is or the style we present, **worship in the missional church should always be Christ-centered.** He's the focus, and He's the object of our worship. Ultimately, it's not about you, and it's not about me. It's about Jesus Christ. This comes as quite a shock to many of us who tend to think of ourselves as consumers when it comes to worship. All of us tend to be very concerned about having our own needs met whenever we come to church.

Contrary to the popular thinking in some churches today, I don't believe that people need to be entertained in worship. What they're longing for is an authentic encounter with the living God of the universe through the person of Christ. Worship redirects our attention away from

ourselves to the One who made us, and in doing this it recalibrates our whole view of the world and what our purpose in life really is. And that has the power to transform our lives. It's not about you, and it's not about me. It's about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, regardless of the form or style, **worship in the missional church should be faithful to Scripture.** The Word of God is central to the Christian faith, and in our efforts to be more sensitive to the people who don't know Jesus and more open to the newcomer in our midst we should never water down or dumb down the Gospel or the authority of Scripture. Our worship services should be biblically-based, because people today are looking for a trustworthy word they can count on. In a time when it seems that truth is up for grabs, the church is the only institution on the face of the earth that can say with confidence, "Thus says the Lord!" The Bible is not only our message book, it's also our method book. And how we worship should also be guided by Scripture as well.

In addition, **worship in the missional church should be in the language of the people,** and it should be accessible to the common person. As I mentioned last week, one of the great things the Reformation recovered was to translate the Latin mass into the language of the people. For too long the worship of God had been foreign to the most people, indecipherable to the average person. Worship in the vernacular is a must if we're going to reach our world for Jesus.

Translating worship into the language of the people also means translating it into their musical language. That's one of the primary cultural carriers of the truth of God by which people worship the Lord. Some people today love traditional, classical music, and others love rock 'n roll. In an effort to be all things to all people (in some measure!), here at First Pres we offer traditional and contemporary musical formats in our worship services.

The final emphasis I want to mention is that **worship should be participative and multi-sensory.** Our world is entering a new era where the primary form of communication is no longer print and verbal explanation. Rather, the primary form of communication is an immersed experience in an audio-visual event. People need to see, hear, feel, and experience the Lord in worship today, and this will increasingly have a profound effect upon the way we do worship in the future. Communion is a great example of what I am talking about. You see, smell, touch, and taste it when you partake of the Lord's Supper. It's a multi-sensory experience.

Conclusion.

In 1963, Dick Fosbury turned the track and field world upside down when he introduced his revolutionary style of high jumping. Instead of approaching the bar and rolling over it with a belly-down, scissor-kick style, he curved and leaped backward at the bar, passing over it with his back to the ground.

Though high-jump traditionalists were skeptical, Fosbury proved the new technique's potential by winning the 1968 Olympic Gold Medal with a world-record jump of 7' 4". The technique became known as "The Fosbury Flop," and within a short time high jumping records at every level were being set by this new way of doing the high jump. For those just learning, this new style quickly became natural. But for those who had refined the scissor-kick-and-roll technique, making the transition to the flop was extremely difficult.

For the past hundred years we Presbyterians have perfected the old scissor-kick-and-roll style of ministry that has been primarily oriented toward providing religious services to our members and trying to attract them to come to church. (If you build it they will come.) But as we make this turn into the 21st Century, many of us are discovering that this style is ineffective in reaching the majority of our population in this new day—the second and third generation of un-churched people who live all around us. We have to approach the bar of ministry and worship in a different way today, like a spiritual Fosbury Flop.

Clark Cowden has written, "The church has been moved to the sidelines of public life, and many are openly wondering about the future viability of the church we love so much. The church is like Rip Van Winkle waking up from a twenty year nap. We are living in the same country, but it's a completely different world. We don't recognize it, and we're not sure what to do about it."²



May God give us wisdom, boldness and courage to explore what it means to be a missional church in every way including our worship. I doubt you'll notice many changes we make to our worship services in the future. We've already been moving in this direction for some time. But we'll experiment a bit more in the days to come as we explore what it means to be a missional church in worship. And, as difficult as it may be to predict what will happen in the future, I think God has some exciting

things in store for us as we do this and as we follow Christ together. Aslan is on the move, and I can't wait to see what He's going to do. Amen.

¹ Alan Hirsh, "Defining Missional" in *Leadership Journal* found at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2008/fall/17.20.html>. Many of the points in this section of the sermon are drawn from Hirsh's article.

² Clark Cowden, Unpublished paper on the Missional Church.