

1-1-1998

Worship in Context

Everett W. Huffard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

Recommended Citation

Huffard, Everett W. (1998) "Worship in Context," *Leaven*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol6/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

WORSHIP IN CONTEXT

Everett W. Huffard

When we assemble to worship, we would like to think that the way we are doing it—or have always done it—is the right way. I really cannot imagine any Christian unconcerned about the validity of his or her worship of God. As I visit churches in Africa, Asia, Europe, and our own nation, I see differences in how we conduct our assemblies, but those differences do not obstruct the fellowship we share in Christ. Such diversity makes me wonder if the way we worship should be our primary concern, when the Bible gives much more attention to *whom* we worship and to the attitude of our hearts in worship. Undue attention to style has led to harsh judgments and to unnecessary stretching of the Word in an effort to support our own cultural style of worship. Our context shapes our worldview so much that we can miss the big picture. All of us—especially those who have never visited a worship assembly of another ethnic or language group—need parameters to evaluate worship.

The God of All Mankind

The experiences and lessons of ancient Israel can bless us in matters of worship. Take, for example, the problems in the days of Jeremiah. Jerusalem was under siege by the king of Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah published the bad news that Zedekiah, king of Judah, would not succeed in defending the city against the Babylonians (Jer 32:5). Because this angered the king, the prophet was confined to the court of the guards in Jerusalem. Few in Israel could understand how God could possibly use an evil nation against his own people.

Jeremiah did two things that put him in tension with his context. He bought a field at the darkest moment in Israel's history (32:6–15) and prayed to God with expressions of praise that most did not feel toward God at the time (32:16–25). The purchase of the field confirmed the hope for redemption. The prayer grounded Jeremiah in the very nature of God—a God of all mankind for whom nothing was too difficult (32:17, 26–29). Although Israel had fallen so low that God would destroy Jerusalem (32:31–35), God would also restore them to safety and prosperity. He gave them words of assurance: “They will be my people, and I will be their God” (32:36–44).

The cause of their problems was their failure to faithfully worship God. The worship of Baal and the offering of children as sacrifices to Molech in times of siege were common cultural practices; the people of Judah had adopted the practices of their pagan neighbors. God never imagined that his people would do such things (32:34–35). Because of their evil, he became angry—enraged—and he determined to allow the city to be totally destroyed (32:32–35).

It is worth noting that God responded to Jeremiah with a unique self-identification—“God of all mankind” or “all flesh.”¹ Jeremiah faced a situation in which the worship of God had been violated, or “defiled” (32:34), by the worst of cultural practices. As “God of all mankind,” God did not expect all nations to learn Hebrew and worship him only in Jerusalem. He did expect all people to worship him within their own cultural contexts. The psalmist sought to bless the Lord *among* all the nations so that all

the families of the earth would glorify God (Ps 96:1–9). John’s revelation painted the picture of an eternity around the throne of God for every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev 5:9–10).

By the first century, Baal and Molech had long since ceased to pollute the worship of God’s people. Now a new issue arose that threatened their worship: the binding of circumcision on the Gentile Christians. Paul challenged that requirement, and the church leaders concluded that Gentiles could worship God if, as disciples of the Messiah, they refused to sacrifice to idols and they observed moral purity (Acts 15:1, 24–29).

Those biblical sketches set some parameters for our discussion of worship in the context of culture. The pure worship of God will always be in tension with any culture that elevates something in creation to the level of the Creator. On the other hand, pure worship does not insist that people worship in ways so uncharacteristic of their cultures as to rob their worship of its meaning.

As a case study, we will contrast the context and expectations of worship for people from the four areas of poverty in North America with those for the suburbanites of major cities.

Context and Expectations of Worship

Phenomenon #1: The 242 consistently poor rural counties of the U.S. are clustered in four areas: Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, Native American reservations, and the Rio Grande Valley. The social structures of poor rural whites, African Americans, Indians, and Mexicans have not prepared them for the changing world of our cities.² As they move into cities to survive, the poor find government housing their only option. Their schools become irrelevant, vocational training prepares them for obsolete jobs, and the government fails to provide justice. Many of the men are alcoholic or in prison, leaving the community without adequate leadership. How does the context of these Americans affect their worship assemblies? After weeks and years of struggle to survive and care for their families, and after the shattering of their human dignity, their needs are great. They know that they need God’s grace—but they are not sure that they are worthy. As they assemble on Sundays in inner-city churches, what do they expect from worship?

Phenomenon #2: In the past fifty years, many middle- and upper-income Americans have moved to the suburbs. They enjoy good jobs with good benefits and the oppor-

tunity for a good education. Suburban churches have benefited from this transition. Their members are clean, well educated, and financially secure. The churches are family centered, with recreational and youth activities. How does the context of these Americans influence their worship assemblies? After weeks and years of fast-paced lives, most of their basic needs have been met—and they are not really sure where God fits into their lives. What do they expect from worship?

Two very different but real phenomena have been presented. Does the potential for idolatry exist in both contexts? Yes. Are the expectations for the worship assembly the same in the two contexts? No.

Idolatry is a reality in both contexts, but the idols have different names. Idolatry in either context can lead to lifestyles that anger God and destroy worship. In inner-city America gambling, alcoholism, and sexual abuses destroy families and churches. The destructive power of evil contributes to the fear of God. When Christians walk out of this context into a worship assembly, they need new resources to wage war against Satan, who seems to be winning. The worship assembly in this context is emotionally charged, with participants celebrating their victories over evil and challenging one another to continue the fight. These Christians need participatory worship with spontaneous expressions of faith and stories of God’s victory in their lives.³ They need the prayers of the church for specific problems. They know where in their lives they need God. They come humbly and are open with their needs. Because so much in their lives is out of their control, they seek assurance that God has the power to overcome and redeem.

In suburban America materialism, individualism, and self-sufficiency destroy the sense of lostness. A sense of physical and financial security diminishes the fear of God. When Christians walk out of this context into a worship assembly, they bring the consumer mindset that expects to “get something out of the service.” These Christians want concepts that can enrich their lives and bring them up to the physical standards of their own world. Serene, reflective, structured worship fits them well. They find refuge in safety and a personal relationship with God. Even though an “invitation” is offered after every sermon, very few accept it. Because so much in their lives is in their control, they simply need assurance that they will not lose God’s blessings.

Changes in the Assembly

If the context changes, will the assembly change? Absolutely. When children in the housing project manage to get an education, go to college, and get a job, they move to another part of town and change churches. A church started by blue-collar whites fifty years ago changes as the members become better educated and more wealthy. The worship assembly changes because people change. Within the same ethnic group, the change can be socio-economic or generational. Education and economy play major roles in reshaping us. The worship assembly anywhere in the world is a reflection of the people who are worshipping. As they change, so the assembly changes. Preventing changes in the assembly would require eliminating people.

We cannot evaluate a worship assembly without discussing culture and context. Try to define a "quality worship assembly" without reference to cultural factors. Start with singing. Singing among the poor reflects the heritage of their own particular culture, be it rural white, African American, Indian, or Mexican. Most of the music in suburban churches comes from a western European heritage.

Preaching styles are also very different in the two contexts. In one, the preacher is highly charged and works the group into an emotional high after an hour or so. In the other, the preacher gives well-reasoned twenty-five-minute sermons. One assembly expects to be inspired and motivated, while the other expects to be educated and reassured. They could each learn from the other how to balance their own assemblies.

Differences in seating arrangement, noise level, pace of the worship service, method of serving the Lord's Supper, and prayer all bring culture into the equation. We simply cannot worship without the communication, values, and symbols of our culture. What we need to learn is how to relate to one another based on our relationships with Christ rather than our particular cultural styles. Within our own assemblies, we should have the freedom to embrace our culture when it contributes to acceptable worship and the courage to challenge our culture when it fails.

Critical Contextualization

Paul Hiebert has proposed a paradigm that missionaries find helpful in leading people to develop faithful worship practices within their own cultures.⁴ His

five-step process can be applied to the worship assembly in any context.

1. Recognize the need to address all areas of life in light of the Word. This essay has introduced only the influence of socio-economic factors on the worship assembly. Traditions, politics, ethnicity, and language are examples of other areas of life that could be addressed.
2. Gather information about the local practice or custom. How broadly is it practiced? What does it mean to those involved?
3. Lead the church in a Bible study related to the practice.
4. Allow the congregation to evaluate the old practice in light of the new biblical teaching.
5. Make the necessary changes. If the changes are always in favor of some outside influence, the congregation will at best be foreign dominated, with minimal potential to transform its world. If the changes are always in favor of the local context, the congregation will become syncretistic. Changes must consider influences from both cultures in the light of God's Word.

Pure worship will always be in tension with aspects of every culture, but every culture has the capacity to worship God faithfully and meaningfully. While God will not tolerate unfaithful allegiance, he can handle the diversity of style better than we can, because he is the "God of all mankind."

EVERETT W. HUFFARD is Professor of Missiology and Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, Tennessee.

Notes

¹G. L. Koehn, P. J. Scalise, and T. G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1995), 157.

²Gary Farley, "Poverty: The Urban-Rural Linkages," in *Envisioning the New City*, ed. E. S. Meyers (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 119.

³Anthony Campolo, "The Sociological Nature of the Urban Church," in *Metro Ministry: Ways and Means for the Urban Church*, ed. D. Frenchak and S. Keys (Elgin, IL: Cook Publishing, 1979), 26–42.

⁴Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 186–90.