

**DESIRING THE KINGDOM *IN MISSIONS*: AN APPLICATION OF
JAMES K. A. SMITH'S "LITURGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY" IN A
CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT**

by Joshua Wu¹

Published in www.GlobalMissiology.org July 2015

Abstract

What is the role of Christian worship in the formation of Christian disciples? Are humans primarily thinkers, or believers, or lovers? Is it possible that worship is not only the goal of missions but also the means of missions as well? James K. A. Smith, in *Desiring the Kingdom*, proposes a liturgical anthropology that seeks to address these questions. This article summarizes Smith's theory as it relates to missions. Readers will then explore the implications of this theory of human formation through worship. Special attention is given to the cultivation of indigenous liturgy. The essay offers particular steps showing (1) how to evaluate where formation happens in a cross-cultural setting and (2) how Scripture has been used historically in worship to form disciples. Finally, the paper proposes guidelines for practicing and embodied Scripture in indigenous ways in worship.

¹ Joshua Wu has served in East and South East Asia for over a decade in the areas of Church Planting (Urban and UUPG), Oral Bible Storying, Vernacular Scripture Translation, and Ethnodoxology. He holds a Master's of Arts in Linguistics as well as a graduate certificate in ethnomusicology from Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. He has done doctoral studies in missiology at the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary. He is currently a vernacular Scripture-Use, Orality, and Ethnodoxology consultant.

What Does An Aluminum Company Teach Us About Missiology?

In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg described the capacity of habit to transform an individual's life, indeed even the life of a corporation. One especially poignant anecdote demonstrates the impact of CEO Paul O'Neill's vision for Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa). In 1987, O'Neill was brought in to save the company from the steady downward momentum into which it had fallen. However, when he met with the board, instead of using the typical buzz words of the day or promising some new trendy management model, he did something else entirely. He simply told them that his plan was this: "I intend to make Alcoa the safest company in America. I intend to go for zero injuries."² The response from the board was not enthusiastic; in fact, many were antagonistic to this new "vision."

What O'Neill understood however was that people and their safety matter and that, if the company, which dealt with many harmful materials, could better protect their employees' health and wellbeing, this would have wide-reaching effects on the company as a whole. O'Neill was correct and, within a year, Alcoa's profits hit a record high. By the time O'Neill retired, the company's annual net income had increased five-fold under his leadership.³ In the case of Alcoa, it turned out that when safety was made the driving priority, it resulted in the ripple effect of greater productivity and subsequently greater profits. Duhigg comments that what O'Neill did for Alcoa was to introduce what is called a "keystone habit," a habit that has reverberating and transformative effects. This type of habit has an ordering effect on other peripheral habits and even produces subsequent habits, which all flow from and are connected to the keystone habit. It is, in many ways, the cornerstone for genuine change in individuals and by extension the institutions they compose.

But what do the safety habits of an aluminum company have to do with world missions? Well, in many ways, John Piper's vision for missions, as stated in *Let the Nations be Glad*, has

² Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012), 98.

³ Ibid, 100.

had a similar effect on missions as O'Neill's vision had on Alcoa. Piper wrote, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't."⁴ Piper goes on to say that worship is the "fuel and goal of missions", and that "[m]issions begins and ends in worship."⁵ For many, this presented completely different way of viewing missions. For me personally, Piper's perspective served as a Copernican revolution in my thinking, taking me from training to be a worship leader in America to being on the front lines of missions among the most unreached in Asia. Just as O'Neill's keystone habit of safety transformed Alcoa, Piper's vision for worship as the ultimate goal of missions has the potential to transform the face of missions.

However, after over a decade overseas trying to live out this vision of worship as the end goal of missions, I have come to the harsh realization that although a passion for worship did indeed fuel my work in mission, I do not really know how best to realize the vision of worship-aimed missions in a non-abstract, concrete way. Attempts to embody that vision led me through urban and rural church planting to Bible translation and Oral Bible Storying to ethnomusicology and even agricultural development for a season. I was seeking desperately to live out the end goal of seeing the nations worship, yet I found myself in a mission field that was fragmented by specialties doing good work but lacking deep synergy and connection with each other. This caused me much personal turmoil. I felt like I was being pulled in too many directions. It is not enough to know that worship is where we are going in missions; we need to know how to get there. I find many have set off on a journey to reach "worship" but have diverged into a multitude of directions. Thus, worship-aimed missions has yet to produce the type of keystone habit and unified vision of practice that we saw at Alcoa under O'Neill.

It was amidst this time of seeking a unifying vision for missions that I came across the works of James K.A. Smith. He helped me apply the vision of Piper with the realities of the mission field and human anthropology. Reading Smith's work, especially his book *Desiring the*

⁴ Piper, John. *Let the Nations be Glad* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2003), 17.

⁵ Ibid.

Kingdom, I realized that worship is not only the beginning and the end goal of missions but also its primary means. I believe Smith's "liturgical anthropology" is a missing link in missions that can fill in the middle space of Piper's vision. Understanding Smith will allow us to understand more deeply how disciples are formed and subsequently to form other disciples, who belong to churches that plant other churches.

This paper seeks to introduce and then apply James K. A. Smith's 'liturgical anthropology' in a cross-cultural missions setting. I specifically consider how Smith's model of Christian formation through worship can be a model and foundation for a unifying new field in missions called "indigenous liturgy."

Desiring the Kingdom: We Are What We Love

James K. A. Smith is a philosophical theologian who writes about the interplay between church and culture. In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith proposes that a number of the underlying anthropological assumptions held by many Christian educators (and by extension Christian missionaries) are flawed. He argues that we, in effect, aim for the wrong target with many of our underlying assumptions regarding how Christian formation comes about. These flawed assumptions have subsequent and reverberating effects on our practices, which, like a keystone habit, affect our strategy and methodology, especially in the area of discipleship and Christian formation. Smith believes that what underlies most approaches to Christian education and discipleship is the assumption that humans primarily are thinkers and/or believers.

Smith points out that the idea of humans as being defined primarily as "thinkers" can be traced back to Greek philosophy. He then shows that the Protestant reformers challenged this notion and helped articulate a refocused anthropology of man that emphasizes humans as "believers" rather than merely "thinkers." Smith, however, does not think the reformers go far enough to return to a truly biblical anthropology. He argues that before we are thinkers and even believers, we are first and primarily lovers. He does not hold this as a new nor lone voice in

history; rather, he shows that this perspective of anthropology can be traced back throughout the church history, all the way back to St. Augustine and even to the Apostle Paul and Jesus Himself.⁶ Smith says,

[w]e are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends. So we are not primarily *homo rationale* or *homo faber* or *homo economicus*; we are not even generically *homo religiosus*. We are more concretely *homo liturgicus*.⁷

Smith summarizes this idea in the short phrase “we are what we love, and we love what we worship”⁸ This is to say that humans are “most fundamentally oriented and identified by love,”⁹ and thus, before we are thinkers or believers, we are lovers. He is careful to point out that this ought never to degrade the roles of the intellect or belief; rather, it should instead put them in their proper place and sequence. Placing things in their proper order and context actually honors or recognizes the value of intellect and belief while keeping in mind that we cannot and should not put the cart before the horse.

He explains that our world is not shaped primarily by *what* we are taught or believe but instead by *how* we are taught and *how* we are shaped to believe the things we believe. This is because prior to any teachings and beliefs, there is an underlying desire that gives birth to a particular kind of teaching and belief. In the famous words of Blaise Pascal, “the heart has its reasons which reason knows not.” If we focus merely on worldview beliefs, we ignore the context and means by which worldview is formed and passed on. This brings us to the truth that “form has meaning.” To use the phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan, “Medium is the message.” Drawing from this stream of thought, Smith goes so far as to argue that, when it comes down to it, “We worship in order to worldview.”¹⁰

⁶ I do not have room to show the extent of this in this article. For a more in-depth argument, cf. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Ada, Mich: Baker, 2009).

⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, 34:10 during a lecture given on January 13th 2010 at Calvin College. Online: <http://www.calvin.edu/january/2010/smith.htm>.

It is impossible in this article to present Smith's complete and comprehensive argument for this liturgical anthropology. However, in what follows, I give a brief overview of the main thrust of his anthropological theory and the resulting implications. My hope is that this perspective will resonate with readers and stimulate further discussion, especially in its applications for the missions community.¹¹

Desiring the Kingdom: Understanding a Liturgical Anthropology

The basic argument of James K. A. Smith's book is as follows: (1) We are what we love (and we love what we worship) (2) Love takes practice. (3) Christian worship is nothing less than the practice of love and the shaping of desire. In the next section, I will briefly unpack this argument and show the implications for Christian missions, specifically in the area of discipleship as scriptural formation.

1. We Are What We Love

In Smith's own words, his "liturgical anthropology" is "just a short hand technical way of saying this, 'Human beings are not only and not even primarily thinkers.' We are not so much defined by what we know, as we are by what we love, what we long for."¹² Furthermore, Smith points out,

[i]n Augustine's *City of God*, for example, worship and love are always bound together and inextricably linked to one another. So to say that human beings are liturgical creatures is just to say that we are creatures defined by our loves, but those loves are shaped by formative practices, and those type of love shaping practices are called liturgies.¹³

¹¹ This may be difficult to understand in such a short paper. I will attempt to give a brief overview of Smith's argument, but I encourage the reader to go back to Smith's book itself for the entirety of this important argument. After I give a brief overview of his argument as a starting point for mutual departure, I will show the implications of this theory in missions and its potential impact in unifying fragmented fields of expertise and practice on the field. I ask the reader to graciously consider Smith's theory and think through its implications.

¹² James K. A. Smith, "Defined by Our Loves: A Liturgical Anthropology." Video presented online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixKR7duSamU>.

¹³ Ibid.

The significance of this, according to Smith, is that the power of love-shaping habits is not just confined to the Church but in fact is everywhere, found across all of culture and in all cultures.¹⁴ Liturgical anthropology necessitates that we understand that there are many forces seeking to seduce our hearts and form us into their own image. These forces are not only abstract demonic forces that lurk in obvious darkness. Most often, they come to us in all too inviting forms, like the shopping mall or the advertisements, which are so prevalent in our lives, or even in our interaction with certain technologies.

If you watch many advertisements or commercials, you can see that advertisers implicitly and deeply understand liturgical anthropology. Marketers most often aim for a person's heart and desires, not one's mind. This is what Smith wants us to perceive.¹⁵ He wants us to recognize all of our life and culture as a battleground for the heart, which is the seat of our loves and desires. We should understand that, once the heart is captured, the mind will soon follow. Thus Smith calls our attention to what he calls "secular liturgies" and to their power to form us. He understands that "liturgies are ritual practices that function as pedagogies of ultimate desire."¹⁶ Therefore, there is a lot at stake in the practices we participate in and propagate, not only on a personal level but also at a communal level.

When speaking about the practices we participate in on a daily basis, Smith also distinguishes between what he calls "thick" and "thin" practices. Smith defines "thin" practices as mundane habits while "thick" practices are meaning-full.¹⁷ Thus, a thin practice according to Smith is something like brushing your teeth or eating the same food for breakfast. In contrast, thick practices go deeper into a person's life and identity, touching one's loves and fundamental

¹⁴ In other words, it is not merely a Western phenomenon but rather a universal feature of being human, regardless of language and culture.

¹⁵ Also, at the risk of sounding anti-technology, notice how smart phones and social media have shaped us and how we interact with people. We shape our habits and technologies but then our habits and technologies also shape us. Many people's interaction with technology and smart phones get into the area of "thick" practices.

¹⁶ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 82.

desires. While eating the same cereal for breakfast out of habit is a “thin” habit, being a vegan can constitute a “thick” habit.

According to Smith, one way that liturgies seek to capture our hearts is by presenting a “vision of the good life,” which he defines as something that “captures our hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideas, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well.”¹⁸ Thus, this vision presents us with and invites us into a story. Liturgies, whether secular or Christian, present us with a “vision of the good life.” They invite us to participate in a set of practices in order to obtain and conform in some way to that image (of the good life). This vision of the good life, which has the power to captivate our hearts and imaginations, is most powerfully communicated through “legends, myths, plays, novels, and films rather than dissertations, messages, and monographs.”¹⁹ In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith devotes an entire section, called “Consuming Transcendence: Worship at the Mall”, to lay out an ethnography and anthropology of the “liturgy of the mall.” He likens a mall to a modern temple, showing how it presents a vision of the good life and how it can shape those who uncritically participate in it.²⁰

Recognizing the presence and power of the “liturgies” around us allow us to better understand and be critical about the things that shape us. In the case of secular de-formation, it allows us to better identify where the captivation and formation of the heart is happening. Once identified, we can consider how counter-measures can be employed for the sake of counter-formation practices to recapture and preserve our love for Christ. This process can also help us evaluate how much of our Christian practices may be subtly co-opted by secular liturgies. We may also discern why some of our Christian discipleship seem short-circuited or lack transformational power. For example, much of the secular liturgy in contemporary western culture shapes us to be consumers and consumeristic. At times, the Western church has been co-

¹⁸ Ibid, 53.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 93–100.

opted by this secular liturgy. Smith poignantly states, “If you make a Jesus version of the Mall, don’t be surprised if your worship does not function as a counter to consumerism. Because you just made Jesus another commodity.”²¹

2. Love Takes Practice

If we are what we love, then we must also realize that love takes practice. Love is formed, cultivated, and propagated by what we do as well as how we do it. By implication, love is not just a byproduct of right thinking. Neither is it the result of being taught right doctrine in a vacuum. Love—very much like marriage—is a commitment that is embodied and practiced; it is incarnational. Love is not merely an emotional response; rather, it is a direction of the will and heart towards something or someone that is desired. The practice of love is something that involves the ordering of our lives; it is embodied and reflected in our habits. A former mentor of mine often reminded our youth group, “Show me how you spend your time and I will show you what you ultimately love and what or who you actually worship.”

Smith shows how we are not so much pushed by our minds as we are pulled by our practices: “Our ultimate love moves and motivates us because we are lured by this picture of human flourishing. Rather than being pushed by beliefs, we are pulled by a *telos* that we desire.”²² We shape our habits but then our habits shape us as we practice them. Thus, we need to be self-aware and intentional about our habits and practices, in particular how they shape us so that we will cultivate practices that form us in the direction that we want to go. We must also be diligent to make sure our practices form desires for the sake of God’s kingdom and not a rival kingdom of this world.

Parents often intrinsically understand the practice of desire when they seek to cultivate certain virtues in their children. My wife and I have been very intentional in helping our

²¹ James K.A. Smith, 32:40 during lecture given on January 13th 2010 at Calvin College. Video available online at <http://www.calvin.edu/january/2010/smith.htm>

²² Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 54.

daughters to cultivate gratitude and generosity. Even before they could speak, we taught them sign language for “please” and “thank you.” We helped them to practice generosity and to share often by going through their toys, helping them choose toys to give away to those who did not have any. The interesting thing is that although our daughters at first did not fully grasp these practices (and much of the time they practiced them just because that is how we taught them), as they got older, these practices took hold in their heart and actually shaped their desires and virtues. Our daughters started practicing gratitude and generosity from the heart in ways we never taught them. They also practiced these things almost as second nature, even when we did not watch them or reinforce the behavior. By practicing these habits, the desire to be a grateful and generous person was born in our daughters; this desire then grew into genuine virtue. Of course my wife and I have also explained and articulated the reasons why they should be grateful and generous; yet, they seemed to be more receptive to understand the reason for the practices once they practiced them and were formed by them. This is a microcosm of what happens with the formation and practice of our loves and desires.²³

3. Christian Worship is Nothing Less than the Practice of Love and the Shaping of Desire

If we are what we love and love takes practice, then Christian worship is the practice of love and the shaping of our desire for the kingdom of God. It is through Christian worship that we remember and recognize God as Savior and King; thus, we train ourselves to desire His kingdom. At this point, it must be said that “Christian worship” should not be reduced merely to the songs we sing in church. These songs are part of Christian worship. However, Smith raises the stakes and looks at Christian worship as a more holistic concept, which includes the whole of our practices when we gather to worship God. He states that “All Christian worship—whether Anglican or Anabaptist, Pentecostal or Presbyterian—is liturgical in the sense that it is governed

²³ We practice certain habits that capture our hearts and these desire-based practices cultivate and culminate in virtues and vices. Virtues being the formation of beneficial and good habits which become second nature, and vices being the (de)formation of harmful and bad habit which also become second nature to us.

by norms, draws on a tradition, includes bodily rituals or routines, and involves formative practices.”²⁴ He even goes further to say,

So when I speak of worship as liturgical, I don’t necessarily mean to favor a particular style of worship; rather, the emphasis is on the formative, embodied practices that constitute Christian worship—and many of these are shared across a diversity of styles, denominations, and theological traditions.²⁵

So what is he saying? He says that our worship is formative, whether it seems highly structured or intentionally unstructured. The fact is that our worship is formative. Worship itself is formed by the story it tells explicitly and implicitly. How it embodies or tells the biblical Story has a proportional effect on its formational power. Not all Christian worship is created equal. Some worship practices are thicker and weightier, constituting the foundation for formation of a keystone habit, which will order other subsequent habits and desires. Other forms of worship are thin, light, and do not carry with it the robust nature needed to create habit-forming practice; they merely reverberate and serve competing secular liturgies. Smith points out that much of what passes for “Christian worship” in the West can be understood as a “Jesus-fied” version of Western secular liturgies and, having thus become syncretized, is devoid of much counter-formational power.

Accordingly, when Smith talks about Christian worship as the practice of love and the shaping of desire, he does not suggest that we merely need to add more music to our church services. What he argues is that we need to see all of our communal practices as formative and as worship; yet, we must also seek to maximize their potential by making them thicker, weightier, and more robust. Smith believes that Christian worship can become thicker, weightier, and more robust when it is rooted in Scripture and the wisdom of the Church throughout history, which can show us how to embody and enact Scripture in community. In effect, the thickness of our worship is proportionate to the amount in which Scripture and the gospel message is clearly

²⁴ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 151.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 153–54.

embodied in and through meaningful and intelligible practices. Within the missions community, those concerned with orality and ethno arts have sought meaningful and intelligible practices to develop creative and indigenous expressions of Scripture and the gospel; however, there is still a tendency to see these practices and embodiments of Scripture as merely optional, “value added” features of mission and not its heart. Hopefully, Smith’s liturgical anthropology will help correct this impression.

Putting This All Together and Putting It All Into Practice

During my years in partnership with *One Story*, I was taught that N. T. Wright was correct when he said, “stories constitute the core of every culture’s worldview.”²⁶ In other words, our beliefs, values and behaviors are built on a narrative, a story, which constitutes a worldview. It is from this narrative-formed worldview that our beliefs, values and behaviors emerge. Thus, it is implied that if we want to change a person’s belief, values or behaviors, we need to give them a better story to subvert their existing story. When a person’s foundational narrative is changed, so will the rest of his or her life. This is true; yet, I think we sometimes fail to realize both what that really means and how a worldview level narrative and story is taught, sustained, and replaced. It is not enough to give a person a one-time vision of the good life. This *gospel’s* vision of the good life must not only be caught but also grown and practiced.

In order for the gospel story truly to supplant a person’s existing worldview-level story and to transform one’s whole life, we need to allow a person to practice the story and let the story formed them over time through practice. This includes but is not limited to mere memorization of words or individual stories. What is needed is an embodiment of the story, allowing it to reverberate throughout one’s entire life. It is only when that happens that our

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992), 40. Quoted in Grant Lovejoy, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Richmond, Va.: IMB), 25. Online: http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54_IG25.pdf

practices will truly have the thickness, weightiness and bandwidth to transform our beliefs, values, and behavior. This is what Smith's point.

For disciples to be deeply and fully formed, they must practice the gospel daily, individually and communally in such a way that it forms their beliefs, actions, and consequently communities. Historically, this has been done through the Word of God and in worship. Thus, the goal of missions is not only worship; after all, worship, when properly understood and practiced, is also the furnace where disciples become disciple makers who truly desire God's kingdom and who will be used by God to build His kingdom around them.

What might this look like on the mission field? How can we as a mission community intentionally put these insights into practice and cultivate "thick" worship, which forms and transforms disciples cross-culturally? I don't have all the answers; however, this seems to be where orality, oral methods, ethnomusicology, ethnodoxology and the rest of the ethno arts really show their potency and centrality. Embodied practices are what the arts do well. Historically, Christian worship has been a center for robust artistic expression. What follows are a few ideas about how we might possibly move forward and spur further discussion. These steps serve as a template and a starting point for cultivating and creating "indigenous liturgy."

Step 1: Identify Where Formation is Really Happening: Where is the War for the Heart Taking Place?

The first step in applying Smith's anthropology in a cross-cultural missions setting is to be aware of, take seriously and explore where formation is actually happening in a culture. We must seek to understand how non-Christians are being formed by their cultural practices, festivals, and rituals. What "story" are they being told through these things? What vision of the good life is being presented to them? What are the practices that propagate their worldview? We need to be intentional in not only looking at the beliefs of a culture but also the underlying practices through which beliefs are formed and expressed. As I mentioned earlier, we can evaluate how people spend their time; therein we will discern what they truly value and love.

Smith also has a very helpful “practice audit,” which may be a very effective place to start in discerning forces and practices of formation.²⁷ In Smith’s practice audit, he suggests we ask various questions about our community and ourselves in order to help uncover where formation happens.

Once missionaries and church leaders have conducted an inventory and evaluation of cultural formation in a particular culture, they can use many of these same tools and questions to see how the Church in that culture forms disciples. Does the Church have practices that form people in ways that cause them to desire God’s Kingdom? Are there cultural practices and values that have snuck into the Church that propagate de-formative liturgies of a rival kingdom and obstruct Christian formation? How might the church address the areas of secular liturgies with a distinct Christian liturgy that is counter-formational? Is the discipleship method and plan merely transfers information from teacher to student? Or, does the practice and formation of desire also take place? How can people intentionally use the corporate and individual worship of God and the embodiment of God’s Word to counteract secular liturgies? These and many more questions can help missionaries, local partners and leaders think through critical issues in the life of the church. It will probably be impossible to find and identify every avenue of formation, but this very practice of searching and naming at least some formative practices can open the eyes of church leaders to identify where formation and de-formation occur. In addition, they will be better equipped to address the problem of de-formation. Once one’s eyes are open to the strategy and schemes of how rival kingdoms seek to capture the heart and practices of a people, it becomes easier to combat them and start “trucking water to the right fire.”²⁸

In essence, the first step in cultivating an indigenous expression of Christian liturgy is to answer two questions. First, “What is the battle ground for the heart in a particular culture?”

²⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 85.

²⁸ Smith gave a very personal and poignant story at Calvin College on January 13th 2010 (Video available online: <http://www.calvin.edu/january/2010/smith.htm>). He stated that the “kingdom of Victoria’s Secret” has waged a war over his teenage son. He said that it is doing so in a very visceral way that is going after his heart and desire. He warns that in such a situation, if he were to merely feed his son’s mind right information but was not concerned with counter-formational measures on a deeper level, he would be in danger of “trucking water to the wrong fire.”

Second, “How is the war for affections and formation being fought?” When we start to grapple with these questions in our cultural context, we can then turn to the treasury of the Spirit’s leading of the Church over 2000 years. We can see how the Spirit has led the Church to worship by using Scripture in and through communal practices in order to combat rival formations. This Spirit-led process forms Christians into the type of people who truly desire the Kingdom of God, to make this Kingdom and its King known.

Step 2: Historical Connectivity and Rootedness: How has the Bible been used Historically in Worship to Form Disciples?

Goethe famously said, “He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth.” We would be wise to heed this word. It is always good to learn from the past. So often, in ignorance or arrogance, we try to recreate from scratch something that has already been made. We ignore or reject the experience and wisdom of those who have gone before us. One gift we have as Christians is that our faith has stretched over thousands of years and across various places. Graciously, the Lord has preserved for us much of the wisdom of these ages. All of us speak as bound to a specific place, time and culture. The men and women of the historical Church were no less bound to their time and place. Yet, their wisdom and example can often speak freshly into our own time and place. Their words can speak powerfully, almost prophetically, to our own age.²⁹ Obviously, we must not hold the traditions of the Church on the same level of Holy Scripture; however, it can be very helpful and wise to allow Scripture to purify the practices of the past, where they may need to be purified, and then let them freshly speak to the present.

²⁹ C. S. Lewis comments, “None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths that we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.” See C. S. Lewis. *On the Reading of Old Books, in Collected Works of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1996), 435.

By studying the use of Scripture in worship throughout history, we see a number of recurring, normative, and universal practices that have been part of Christian worship from the beginning. Smith mentions some of these reoccurring features of worship through the ages:³⁰

1. Call to Worship: An Invitation to be Human
2. God's Greeting and Mutual Greetings: Hospitality, Community, and Graced Dependence
3. Song: Hymning the Language of the Kingdom
4. The Law: Order, Norms, Freedom for the Good
5. Confession and Assurance of Pardon: Brokenness, Grace, Hope
6. Baptism: Initiation into a Royal priesthood, Constitution of a New People
7. The Creed: Situating Belief
8. Prayer: Learning the Language of the Kingdom
9. Scripture and Sermon: Re-narrating the World
10. Eucharist: Supper with the King
11. Offering: Kingdom Economics of Gratitude
12. Sending as Witnesses: The Cultural Mandate Meets the Great Commission

In each of these areas, Scripture is recited, sung, received, heard, embodied, and enacted in different ways. Yet, each of these movements in worship constitutes an individual act of the Story of redemption. When told together, they form “thick” Scripture-soaked worship. Through ongoing practice, they have the power to transform the worshipper into the type of person who truly desires the Kingdom. It is important to look back on both the use of Scripture in worship, particularly the way that each worship practice uses Scripture formatively to shape disciples.

Although Smith's list is not a comprehensive set of practices for worship, it does contain a number of practices that form the backbone of the liturgical heritage in much of the Christian

³⁰ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 158–212. It would be well worth it to go to this section of Smith's book and read his reflections on each of these in detail.

West.³¹ There is no set methodology for how each of these movements is embodied. In fact, I suggest that each of these movements in worship needs to be translated in ways that are meaningful for the local church and can be practiced in intelligible ways. What do we find when we look at the history of how the Spirit has used Scripture in worship to form people? We gain a kind of template and boundaries within which we have the freedom and honor of working with the Spirit towards fresh expression and embodiment. We must be mindful that context affects meaning. Liturgical practices need to be translated from culture to culture to maintain their meaning and intelligibility and, thus, their formative power.³²

Step 3: Translate and Indigenize Historical Scripture Practice

We can now move forward to translate and indigenize worship practices; after all, practices need to be translated just as much as words do. In this endeavor, we can learn from the field of language translation in order to understand the interplay between form and meaning. Within a culture, form and meaning are linked. Yet, when crossing cultures, we must discern how best to translate meaning and wed it with an appropriate new form.

What example illustrates the translation and indigenization of practice? Consider how people show honor in various cultures. Every culture shows honor and respect in different ways. In some cultures, respect is shown with eye contact. In other contexts, it is shown by not making eye contact. Despite the differing forms of practice across cultures, the specific practices convey the same the meaning—showing respect.

There is much that could be said about how and to what extent practices can be translated from culture to culture. I will focus on one particular example, which frames our exploration of the translation and indigenization worship practices.

³¹ There is also a very rich liturgical heritage in the Christian East that also highly values the power of liturgical formation, but its liturgy has distinctions from the liturgical tradition in the West. I think the Eastern Liturgical tradition may have a lot of helpful points of wisdom for those in Eastern cultures.

³² Yet, as we translate practices, we must also be careful about avoiding syncretism. A discussion about how to translate practices in a way that is not syncretistic is beyond this articles scope.

At its essence, Christian worship seeks to ascribe honor to God. However, different cultures express honor in countless ways. If one tried to honor someone in a way unfamiliar to him in his culture, the result could range from simple lack of communication to relationship-hindering shame. In translating and indigenizing liturgical practice, we must look at what the practices means *both* in the context from which they are drawn *and* how that meaning can be translated with dynamic equivalency.³³

For example, in traditional Anglican liturgy, the beginning of the service starts with a procession of the cross into the worship space. The cross is then followed by the clergy and servers. Traditionally, when this happens, the congregation stands, turns toward the cross, and then bows as it passes. This is how the Anglo-Saxon people indigenized the ancient Gaelic and Roman liturgies that they had received. To a sixteenth century Anglo-Saxon living under a king, this act was steeped with meaning because it entailed treating the cross as a sign and symbol for Christ as their king. The cross served as a physical representation of Christ the king coming into the presence of His people to receive their honor and praise.

Likewise, Anglo-Saxons responded with actions similar to those they would acknowledge the presence of their political ruler: They (1) stand up to show honor; (2) face him to show respect, instead of standing with their backs turned; finally, (3) they bow when the king is near in order to show submission to his reign. We can see how this seemingly small act, at the commencement of Anglican liturgy, is filled with thick practices full of formative meaning.

In its original context, this practice expresses the fact that God is among them. He has sought them out. He has responded to them. He has called them to worship. He extends hospitality to them. He is distinct, holy and alone worthy of utmost honor. The procession, which accounts for mere moments of the worship service, conveys all this and more. This act sets the tone for the liturgy and prepares the congregation for the rest of the service, which includes their being pardoned by King Jesus, hearing King Jesus' Word, hearing King Jesus' exhortation,

³³ This is a concept known within the field of Bible translation but applied here to the translation and adaptation of ritual practices.

participating in King Jesus' banquet feast, and receiving a commission from King Jesus to be his ambassadors to the world. These liturgical acts speak very powerfully to worshipers. Likely, such worship practices would be especially significant for oral learners.

In some cultures, the above practices may be devoid of their intended meaning and so need to be translated. For example, Confucius in *Analects* writes about the proper way of showing honor in his context. He writes, "Ritual calls for one to bow at the foot of the stairs. Nowadays people bow at the top of the stairs, but this is presumptuous."³⁴ Presumably when meeting with a master or noble you were supposed to bow before ascending the stairs to see them; this was a sign of humility and showed honor. On the contrary, ascending the stairs and then bowing was bold and "presumptuous." Thus, if a Christian community wanted to indigenize the liturgical practice of showing honor in a Confucian culture, they might consider creating a practice of worshipers bowing before they entered the Church building. This would show that they were going to meet with the True Master and humbly want to show honor, not bold presumption.

When seeking to indigenize liturgical practices, however, Christians must not uncritically translate the cultural practices. The gospel must speak to the translation process, just as it did in the Anglo-Saxon context. Although the Anglican liturgy drew from images of a royal court, in the immediate Anglo-Saxon context, a royal court was not always a safe or comfortable place to be. Often, kings did ignoble things. Nevertheless, this did not stop Anglicans from drawing from kingly imagery, especially as Scripture is full of pictures of God as King over His people.

The Anglican liturgy used Spirit-led, creative imagination to envision in their context what it meant for Jesus to be their true King in time and space. He was not an immoral and dishonorable King, but rather a holy King, worthy of honor. In their context, they could only come before the king when invited. Not just anyone could come before the king. However, in

³⁴ *Analects of Confucius*, Book Nine, line 3, page 60. Translated by Burton Watson. New York: Columbia University, 2007.

their worship, Christ King extends to them a loving, open and everlasting invitation sealed in His own blood, bidding all to come, regardless of status.

Thus, the Anglican liturgy *engaged* their culture, *translated and indigenized* liturgical practices that connected with the culture; also, it *redeemed* various cultural practices via the gospel. I think this is a great model for us as we seek to do the same. We must *engage, translate and indigenize*, and through the gospel *redeem* cultural rituals and practices.

We know this practice of translating and indigenizing worship goes back to the very early days of Christian worship because the early Christians chose to worship on Sunday instead of the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday.³⁵ They adopted ancient Jewish practices: setting apart one day of the week for worship; however, they translated it and indigenized it. Further, they infused that practice with the gospel; for instance, they worshiped on Sunday to honor and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, their Lord and God. They took the template given to them by history. They *engaged* their culture, but they allowed the Spirit to breathe fresh *translation and meaning* into it *by the gospel*. In doing so, they created a *Christian Sabbath*. This is the essence and heart of indigenous liturgy.

The *Vertical Habits* provide a lens through which to understand the dynamics of the meanings of our worship acts.³⁶ These “habits” use relational words to show the different interpersonal dynamics at play in worship. These habits include:

1. “I love you”- Praise
2. “I’m sorry” – Confession
3. “Why?” – Lament
4. “I’m listening” – Illumination
5. “Help” – Petition
6. “Thank you” – Thanksgiving
7. “What can I do?” – Service
8. “Bless you” – Blessing

³⁵ It is hard to get into too much detail about the translation and indigenization of practice without speaking of a specific context. The important part is to clearly think through how practices function and how they may be translated.

³⁶ For more information see the vertical habits recourse page, see Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Online: <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/practical-resources-for-vertical-habits>

This inventory might well be used as a sort of check list for creating indigenous liturgy to make sure the worship being created is relationally balanced and that we learn to interact with God with the same range of emotions with which we interact with each other. It is also helpful to unpack some of these relational dynamics within a culture and look at subsets of each. For example, honor and respect can be seen as an aspect or subset of love.

While in the US, my wife and I have worshipped at a very lovely and peculiar church. The church is an evangelical Anglican church, part of the ACNA (Anglican Church in North America). Though evangelical and reformed in its theology, it is highly liturgical in its practice and worship. We have a playful expression we often use to describe our parish: “We preach like Baptists but dress like Romans (Catholics).” The “smells and bells” of the high liturgy were completely new to my wife, whose previous experience of worship was primarily in intimate house churches in Asia. I did not know how she would like it. After our first couple of Sundays, I asked my wife if she had any thoughts about the worship. I knew that it must, at very least, have been an interesting cultural experience for her. To my surprise, she found it very familiar. Although it did not seem like it on the surface, it felt very familiar and “Asian” to her because it showed God so much honor in a very real and physical way. She then thought deeply to herself, carefully thinking how to articulate her thoughts and feelings. She then told me how in her home culture in “Asia” many people are just “culturally Buddhist” and not “real Buddhists.” Even cultural Buddhists show great respect and honor for images of the Buddha, the Buddhist writings, for temples and for monks, they often wear costly amulets and prayer beads, they bow, burn incense and do all these things to show honor to the Buddha or things related to Buddhism. She then paused and said, “Sometimes I think people who are even just culturally Buddhist show more honor to the Buddha in their worship than many real Christians do, even though we are the ones who worship the true God.” She then paused again and told me in a very somber way, “If we say our God is above all of the idols, yet our worship does not show this in our reverence, what does it tell non-believers about our God?” This cut me to the heart and made me think

about how many churches in Asia may benefit by translating and indigenizing ways of showing honor to God in their worship, and how this would be a very powerful witness to non-believers. It was such a powerful dynamic in worship that it communicated cross-culturally to my wife without even being first properly translated and indigenized.

My wife's comments about her experience of a high Anglican liturgy also made me think about how other cultures' worship of God can help fill in places that may be lacking in a particular culture. For my wife, this was the expression of honor in a particular way. Sometimes it may be helpful and needed to insert a new practice into a culture because that culture lacks an appropriate expression for a necessary part of worship. Confession of sin and assurance of pardon may be an example of this. Some cultures have very clear and understood norms about how to be reconciled with someone when you have offended, shamed, or wronged. However, other cultures do not have a very clear ceremony for this. In a case where there are no cultural substitutes, we may need to introduce a new practice in the most culturally sensitive and understandable way possible (even if it remains a bit foreign).

Step 4: Expand the Scope of the Worship and Formation beyond Regular Sunday Morning and into All Aspects of Life

So far we have seen that in the process of cultivating indigenous liturgy, we need to identify where formation is happening in a culture, we need explore the historical worship cataloged, then we need to engage, translate, indigenize, and Gospel-transform practices for a particular worship context. At times, this process requires drawing closely from current cultural practices. At other times, it requires we introduce new practices.

The last step is to expand the scope of worship and formation beyond a single Sunday morning worship time and to explore how worship can permeate all the rituals and practices of life. As a starting point, we should discern how the culture acknowledges major life events, such as birth and marriage as well as festivals, feasts, and times of transition and crisis, e.g. travel, harvest, sickness, and death. Every culture has its own set of practices surrounding these things.

If a Christian community does not address how they will practice these events, new believers will almost certainly default to the secular liturgies surrounding the celebration of these events in their culture, which often are in direct opposition with the Christian faith. If we fail to allow Scripture to shape these events and practices, we run the risk of syncretism and spawning all sorts of new types of “voodoo.”

Consider a very important biblical practice that marks a major life event—baptism, the initiation rite of the Christian faith. Historically, baptism and initiation rites were not exclusively a “Christian.” However, the early Christians transformed the concept and practice of baptism. Jesus even gave a command to the church to go into all nations “baptizing” (Matt 28:19). Baptism became such an important practice for Christians throughout history that the rite of baptism and the rite of birth even merged in the rite of infant baptism.

In the Anglican tradition, there are also liturgies such as last rites, which are worshipful expressions of Scripture spoken to and over a person as he prepares for impending death. The liturgy of last rites offers a time for confession and assurance of forgiveness through Jesus, as well as a reminder of the Gospel, and all of this is done in a way that is utterly filled with Scripture.

Another way that liturgy can expand beyond Sunday morning is by observing liturgical time. Accordingly, the church keeps track of the year based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It fills the year with feasts, fasts and festivals that celebrate and embody the life and ministry of Jesus. There are also other practices of morning and evening prayers. By praying the liturgical hours of the day, these times serve as anchors to the soul throughout the day through reading, reciting, singing, and remembering Scripture and the Gospel. All of these things, if properly Scripture-soaked and gospel-focused, can serve as thick and formative worship practices, which slowly yet concretely turn the whole of a person’s life into an act of worship. Thus, they form that person into someone who truly and deeply desires the King and His kingdom.

The importance of baptism as an initiation rite became very real to me in 2013. At that time I was serving in Asia. My wife and I were asked to meet with and disciple a young lady named Shelby.³⁷ Shelby had been a Christian for over a year. She became a Christian while on a three-month foreign exchange visit in the U.S. Her host family shared the gospel with her. When she returned to Asia, she connected with our friends, meeting with them weekly for Bible study. Our friends left for a couple months and wanted us, particularly my wife,³⁸ to continue meeting with Shelby weekly for Bible study and discipleship. During our time studying together, the topic of baptism came up in our reading. To our surprise, Shelby told us she had never before heard of it. We told her that baptism and the Lord's Supper were the two institutions given to the Church by Jesus. She told us she had also never heard of the Lord's Supper. She had been a believer for over a year and was discipled by two sets of different people from different Christian denominations but had yet to hear about baptism and the Lord's supper!³⁹ My wife explained baptism and the Lord's Supper to Shelby as seen in the Bible and practiced by the Church. After a few weeks, Shelby decided that she wanted to be obedient to Jesus and be baptized. I told her that a minimum requirement for baptism is to be baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

I then told her that historically there have been special ways in which the Church celebrated baptism. I pulled out the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and an English example and showed her the baptism liturgy. In the baptism liturgy, the person being baptized is asked questions about her faith, confesses the Apostles' Creed along with the other Christians present, and renounces the devil and all his deeds and commits to serving Jesus for the rest of her life. I also told her that in some traditions a person who is baptized dresses in white to represent being washed and cleansed of sin and now as white as snow (cf. Isa 1:8). We asked Shelby how she

³⁷ Her name has been changed for her protection.

³⁸ My wife and Shelby grew up in the same Asian country.

³⁹ This may sound surprising, but as I started to ask around and explore, I found that Shelby's case is that that uncommon.

⁴⁰ In Christian history, water has always been the means of baptism.

would like to receive baptism. We could do it very quickly and easily with water and in the triune formula, or we could do it in the more traditional way with the whole ceremony and ritual. She emphatically expressed that she wanted the tradition and the ceremony. This all unfolded only two weeks before Easter, so we decided to celebrate her baptism on Easter morning, which happens to be another wonderful tradition of the Church.

When Easter morning came, our house church met, and, after a time of singing and Scripture reading, we filled up the bathtub and proceeded to baptize Shelby following a liturgy closely adapted from the Book of Common Prayer. After this, we all shared a meal together. Then around the meal table we simply and humbly celebrated the Lord's Supper. This was Shelby's first communion.

Later that week, we met with Shelby to debrief and ask her thoughts on being baptized and sharing communion. Her eyes lit up as she told us that it was the most special day of her entire life. She said that, later that night, she was lying in bed, processing all of what had happened. She said that she had this deep realization that she was "really a Christian." We asked her what she meant, and she went on to explain. She said that for the previous year she had believed in Jesus with her mind, but, after going through the ceremony of baptism and sharing in communion, she felt for the first time that she was really and truly a Christian with her heart. She said she realized that she was now Christ's and that had implications for how she lived her life. She said that the very next day she was filled with a deep desire for God's kingdom, and she wanted to share the gospel of that Kingdom with others. She then started to tell us about all the people with whom she had shared the gospel with over the previous few days. We were amazed. I do not think that liturgical formation always works this fast; yet, Shelby's testimony demonstrates how powerful it can be. Shelby is now pursuing full-time ministry in Asia and discerning a call to cross-cultural missions.

Conclusion: Desiring the Kingdom in Missions through Indigenous Liturgy

A dear Thai friend of mine served as a missionary with her American husband in Asia for many years. The couple moved back to America and, to my surprise, started attending an Eastern Orthodox parish. I asked the couple what led them to attend such a highly liturgical church. The wife said,

I was born and raised in Thailand. When I became a Christian in many ways I felt that I had to give up being Thai. But now worshiping God in a liturgical way, for the first time in my life, I feel that I am fully Christian and fully Thai. When I worship God in the liturgy, my body understands what I am doing. It is not like I am getting confused and think I am worshiping Buddha or some idol, I know I am worshiping the true God, it is just that as a Thai person I understand the language of liturgy, this is my language, and I am finally able to speak it in worship.

That heartfelt explanation from my friend encouraged me but also broke my heart. I thought to myself, “How many other believers have had their worship heart language muted because of a failure to cultivate indigenous liturgy that speaks to their hearts and bodies?” This is what indigenous liturgy seeks to address. Some will find that the thick practices of Christian worship give voice to the deep longings of their hearts and souls. Others will find that learning Christian worship is like learning to speak for the first time. It is at times difficult, awkward, and uncomfortable. However, if they persevere and after much practice, they will not only learn to speak but will also sing with this newfound language.

I am convinced that indigenous liturgy is actually not something new at all; it is very ancient, being a part of the Church’s DNA from its beginning. Furthermore, according to Smith’s liturgical anthropology, it is part of our very DNA as human beings. It is something God has put in us to draw us back to Himself. We were made to cultivate and be formed by indigenous liturgy. However, in a desire to streamline, simplify, and more rapidly reproduce a minimalist vision of the Church, this has been lost and forgotten by some streams of modern Christianity, especially in missions.

If we, as a missions community, remember and return to this deeply rooted aspect of worship in the Church, we will find it brings together the best practices of discipleship, church planting, translation, orality, ethnomusicology and ethno arts into a more comprehensive vision and action plan. This unified approach has the potential to draw together all the specialties within the field of missions. It provides a concrete and practical way to serve the Church with lasting effectiveness. We can understand that worship is not only the beginning and ultimate end goal of missions; it is also the means to reach that ultimate goal.

If we make thick worship the priority and center of our work in missions, it will constitute a formative keystone habit that will transform how we evangelize, how we translate, how we teach and train, how we church plant, how we do business, and how we seek social justice. Just as the keystone habit of safety transformed Alcoa, so to the keystone habit of worship can transform missions anew.

This transformation in our age also has the potential to impact missions in the future. If we thoughtfully, prayerfully, faithfully cultivate indigenous liturgy in our generation, then future generations will look back and draw from us, as we drew from those before us. As a result, they will better understand how to practice the gospel in their context, for the sake of our great King. We should reflect on the words of the Apostle Paul, who wrote concerning the Gospel, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice” (Phil 4:9, NIV).