

“Scott Aniol’s book contributes to several discussions at once. He provides an insightful critique of the Missional Church movement, interacts with the current discussion about Christianity and culture, and offers biblical direction for shaping worship in local congregations. The book is an important defense of conservative Christianity that manages to remain charitable in the face of significant disagreements. Aniol’s work should be required reading for every course in ecclesiology, missiology, and liturgics.”

—Kevin T. Bauder
Research Professor,

Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

“In seeking to be biblical yet missional in worship, is your church finding it difficult to traverse the narrows between the Scylla of irrelevancy on the one side, and the Charybdis of cultural captivity on the other? With the wisdom and foresight of a skillful navigator, Scott Aniol points the way forward through a sophisticated examination of the emerging movement that has transformed many evangelical churches. Aniol contributes significantly to the contemporary discussion because he has a head surrendered to the Word of God and a heart fully dedicated to speaking the gospel to contemporary culture. This book will reset the discussion concerning what it means to worship God with missional force and scriptural fidelity.”

—Malcolm B. Yarnell III

Professor of Systematic Theology,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sacred cows usually make poor hamburgers, but Dr. Aniol’s book serves up tasty ones by addressing issues that have become twenty-first-century sacred cows, namely missional terms, values, and attitudes that one critiques only at great peril. Aniol does so carefully, with the skill of a surgeon, using a biblically balanced scalpel to address emergent church challenges and sets forth insightful correctives. He engages cultural concerns within the set of the larger issues of contextualization in the disciplines of missiology and cross-cultural communication of the gospel. This is a must read for those engaged in analysis of worship styles and missiology alike.”

—Keith Eitel

Professor of Missions & World Christian Studies,
Roy Fish School of Evangelism & Missions

“Scott Aniol’s *By the Waters of Babylon* carefully assesses the nature of culture and worship with freshness and from a biblical base. Many will not agree with his conclusions, but no one engaged seriously in worship should fail to read this monograph. Clever, thought provoking, biblical, and firm, Aniol’s perspective is profoundly relevant to our churches today.”

—Paige Patterson
President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In a day when cultural relativism has gripped the thinking of the church, we need Scott Aniol’s reminder that God is not only a culture maker but also a culture changer. I thank God for a book that exposes the myth of cultural neutrality, explains the wrong thinking that leads to it, and calls the church to embrace what he calls a “sanctificationist approach to culture.” I heartily recommend Aniol’s timely and articulate challenge to the popular versions of syncretistic contextualizing of worship that are so harming the church today. I pray that we will heed his appeal and return to worship that is regulated by scripture alone.”

—Scott T. Brown
Pastor, Hope Baptist Church
President, National Center for Family Integrated Churches

“Dr. Aniol offers a groundbreaking treatment of the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Christian worship in the twenty-first century, integrating the themes of culture, mission, contextualization, and song for the post-Christian church. The research reflected here is of timeless value, and I expect to refer to it for decades to come.”

—Mark Snoeberger
Professor of Systematic Theology, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

By the Waters of Babylon

WORSHIP IN A
POST-CHRISTIAN
CULTURE

SCOTT ANIOL



Kregel
Ministry

By the Waters of Babylon: Worship in a Post-Christian Culture

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FOREWORD

by T. David Gordon

The surprising acrimony that sometimes attended the “worship wars” of the last several decades suggested that we were talking past each other; that what we were talking about was somehow the tip of a larger, undiscussed iceberg beneath the surface. Almost all of us who have written about it have encountered opponents who misrepresented us substantially, if not entirely—not because they intended to do so, but because there are and were blindspots in the conversation, omissions that made it very difficult to hear what people actually were and were not saying. In this volume, Scott Aniol introduces us to the iceberg beneath the surface.

On first glance, some readers will wonder why a book about worship includes a discussion of the distinction between “emerging,” “emergent,” and “missional” churches. But Aniol demonstrates convincingly that behind these labels are different understandings not only of the relative priority of worship and mission, but even more profoundly different understandings of “culture” and cultural forms/norms. The first six chapters discuss these matters clearly, fairly, thoroughly, and judiciously; even readers who resolve some of the matters differently than the author will agree that he has represented their view justly, and has evaluated it dispassionately. The book would be valuable for these six chapters alone; and they would be useful as an introduction to cultural analysis and aesthetics on their own merits.

In these first six chapters, Aniol challenges the notion of cultural neutrality, a notion upon which much of contemporary Christian worship depends. He rightly argues that if individual sinners sometimes do unholy things, groups of such individual sinners also sometimes do unholy things, and what we call “culture” is merely the behavior that characterizes

such groups of individuals. While of course God's original created order was/is "good," the works of rebellious sinners are not always good; and therefore God's works and ours should not be confused: "Wolters fails to distinguish between God's creation and man's creation. He often conflates the two categories, equating the intrinsic goodness of God's handiwork with what mankind produces" (79). In the sixth chapter, Aniol presents a lucid, biblical, alternative to false, secular understandings of culture.

The remaining five chapters present a biblical theology of worship as a gathering/meeting of God's people in His presence, by His invitation, according to His precepts, through the redemptive work of His Son. These chapters comprehend a survey of the entire biblical understanding of worship—from the original state of innocence to the consummated state in the life to come, indicating both the similarities and differences in the major moments of redemptive history along the way. In these chapters, Aniol presents a cogent argument that mission serves the greater value of worship; not the other way around. He also suggests in these chapters that Christian worship, far from imitating secular/unholy cultures' supposedly neutral habits, establishes and nurtures a holy culture, that even in its present imperfection anticipates the coming holy culture in its consummated state.

The subtitle of the book—*Worship in a Post-Christian Culture*—not only concurs in employing what may be a more accurate understanding of our moment than "post-modern"; it also gently suggests that we would be ill-advised to conform our liturgy to any merely human culture, and surely not to one that is post-Christian.

Some Goldilockses will say this book is "too much": too much discussion of culture and its impact on our assumptions about worship. Other Goldilockses will say it is "too little," too rapid a survey of both Christian concepts of culture and of Christian worship. I think it's just right; previous conversations about worship have been less likely to discuss the two in their relations to each other. A significant bibliography (pp. 185–199) and indices will assist those who desire to study either matter at greater length.

chapter 1

WE SAT DOWN AND WEPT:
PROBLEMS FOR
WORSHIP IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY

*By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How shall we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
Psalm 137:1–4*

Imagine how they felt. For four hundred years, ever since King Solomon finished building the grand Temple in Jerusalem, the Israelites had enjoyed free and rich worship in their land. David had successfully defeated most of Israel's enemies, he had made all the preparations for the Temple and the worship to take place there, and under Solomon's reign the kingdom flourished.

On the day of the Temple dedication many years ago, hundreds of Levitical singers joined with 120 trumpeters in the Temple courts as they made themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord: "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" (2 Chron. 5:13). And ever since then, elaborate rituals of worship according to God's instructions took place there for the benefit of all the people.

Yet false worship from the pagan nations crept into the land, and as a direct result of this terrible breach of God's law, the kingdom split in two. Even then, faithful Israelites were able to worship God freely, and regular Temple practices continued.

That all changed in the early sixth century BC. Nebuchadnezzar swept into the land, and after several defeats and deportations, he finally destroyed Jerusalem, including its magnificent Temple. The Israelites now found themselves in a strange land. They no longer had their own culture, protected from foreign influence. They no longer had the Ark of the Covenant, their altars, or their Temple. They no longer had their worship.

Imagine how they felt. How could they take up their lyres and sing the songs they once sang in the splendor of that great city? How could they worship their God according to his instructions when they didn't have the tools he required? How could they rejoice in his steadfast love when they were surrounded by their enemies? They were captives in Babylon; they had no reason to sing.

Instead, they sat down and wept.

Although the circumstances are certainly not exactly parallel, Christian worship in the West faces many of the same challenges as this tragic account of Israel's captivity. Emperor Constantine's legalization of Christianity in AD 313, and especially the establishment of Nicene Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire by Theodosius I in 380, created the conditions for what has come to be called Christendom—the union of church and state in the West such that Christianity and the West became almost synonymous. In fact, many of these early religious leaders

envisioned Christendom as the New Israel, erecting ornate sanctuaries and altars, establishing a priesthood, and developing elaborate worship liturgies reminiscent of the Hebrew worship of old.

This situation persisted for hundreds of years, and while it was theologically problematic and led to many errors that resulted in need for Reformation, in the kind providence of God it did create some benefits. The most significant of these is likely the fact that free worship of the true God was permitted and even expected across the empire. The fruit of these freedoms is particularly evident in the Reformation worship traditions. With significant theological errors confronted, Reformation traditions of various stripes were enabled to perpetuate free and open God-centered, Bible-saturated worship.

Yet once again God's people were taken captive. This time, however, the invasion was not by a pagan nation but by secular philosophies, ideas that questioned the supernatural and placed their trust fully in human autonomy and reason. These influential philosophies had begun to emerge much earlier, but during the eighteenth century they came to dominate thought in the West, putting to an end the impact Christian worship had enjoyed for hundreds of years.

The people of God once again found themselves in a strange land. But this time, many of them didn't even notice.

Such is the context for what I address in this book. By all accounts Christendom is dead, and unbiblical beliefs have progressively permeated western thought, expectations, and culture. So how should churches respond to this seismic shift in their relationship to an increasingly post-Christian culture?

This question has been answered in several different ways in recent years: First, some churches continue to practice Christendom-shaped worship and completely ignore the unbelieving world around them. Churches were lulled into passivity during Christendom since everyone attended church, and thus failure to recognize the death of Christendom has left many churches impotent in their mission to evangelize the nations.

On the other hand, some churches have recognized their need to reach unbelievers with the gospel, yet they continue to operate with Christendom methods by expecting unbelievers to come to them. The church growth movement followed this pattern by insisting that a church's primary service should be an evangelistic meeting designed to attract and

meet the needs of “seekers.” This perspective drew fire from some who argued that this ignores worship altogether, others who complained that believers were not disciplined, and still others who claimed that this “attractional” model of evangelism just did not work.

Yet in the past twenty years a new movement has emerged in evangelical Christianity that has reshaped the conversation in subtle yet profound ways by suggesting that the two priorities of worship and mission are not separate but in fact essentially connected, subsumed under the umbrella of the mission of God. Recognizing both the death of Christendom and the biblical necessity of reaching the unbelieving world, this missional church movement has significantly altered discourse about evangelism and worship, influencing evangelical churches with both a new posture toward culture in general and a new vocabulary regarding every aspect of its existence.

Missional? Emergent? Emerging? What?

If you are an evangelical Christian, chances are you’ve heard the term “missional.” Perhaps you’ve used it yourself! Yet since many different kinds of churches use the term to describe often quite divergent philosophies, the term itself can be misleading. As Alan Hirsch notes,

However, the word *missional* has tended, over the years, to become very fluid, and it was quickly co-opted by those wishing to find new and trendy tags for what they were doing, be they missional or not. It is often used as a substitute for *seeker-sensitive*, *cell-group church*, or other church growth concepts, thus obscuring its original meaning.¹

As a result, many different groups have adopted the term even though they may share little more with each other than a desire to reach the lost.

A second and related challenge is that the idea of *missional* is strongly associated with the infamous “emergent church” movement. While true that those in the emergent church do share with the missional church movement an impulse to engage the culture with the gospel, they do

1. Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 82. Emphasis original.

not necessarily share a common definition of gospel. For example, Mark Driscoll, an early emergent leader who has since repudiated what he sees as doctrinal heterodoxy in the movement,² is quick to distinguish between *emerging* and *emergent*:

The emerging church is a broad term referring to a wide variety of evangelicals seeking to be the missional church. In contrast, *Emergent* is an organization promoting a more theologically liberal and non-evangelical version of the missional church that often does not even meet the definition of a church. . . .³

He acknowledges the confusion with the terms, however, which reveals the connection between *emerging*, *emergent*, and *missional*:

Over the years, I and others have attempted to explain the difference between the emerging church and the Emergent Village (or emergent church). Despite our best efforts, the terms are so similar that they understandably cause confusion for those unfamiliar with them. Because of this confusion and ambiguity, some have moved away from using the terms *emerging* or *emergent*. I prefer to use the term *missional* to describe those who want the church to be a missionary in culture. Some people use the term *emerging church* as synonymous with *missional church*, but for others, *emerging church* is synonymous with *emergent*. I believe that when the question on which this chapter is based [What can traditional or established churches learn from “emerging churches?”] refers to “emerging churches,” it means “missional churches.” The Emergent Village is a liberal subset of the missional church.⁴

A final challenge is the association of *missional* with liberal theology and the social gospel. As is clear from the history of the missional move-

2. Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 21.

3. Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 218–19. Emphasis original.

4. Mark Driscoll, *Religion Saves: And Nine Other Misconceptions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 210. Emphasis original.

ment, this association has legitimate grounding due to the prevalence of these two theological priorities among those who initiated the ideas embedded in *missional*. However, leaders in the conservative evangelical missional church movement explicitly repudiate what they consider unbiblical extensions of the missional impulse, including a redefinition of gospel that limits it to social action only.

So allow me to define what I mean by “missional” in this book. My focus is primarily on the conservative evangelical North American missional church movement that traces its philosophy to Leslie Newbigin and the Gospel and Our Culture Network.

In order to clarify definitions and distinguish themselves from other groups that claim the title of “missional,” several conservative evangelical missional leaders joined forces in April of 2011 to frame a “Missional Manifesto” with the purpose of articulating core ideas underlying the term “missional” and urging evangelicals to live in light of these ideas.⁵ The framers of this document are Ed Stetzer, Alan Hirsch, Tim Keller, Dan Kimball, Eric Mason, J. D. Greear, Craig Ott, Linda Bergquist, Philip Nation, and Brad Andrews. When I talk about being “missional” in this book, I am referring primarily to the manifestation of missional ideas represented by groups who identify with the doctrinal core and missional characteristics of this Missional Manifesto.

Is the Missional Answer Right?

Missional ideas have come to saturate almost every sphere of evangelicalism in recent years. For example, the use of the term *missional*, as opposed to *missions* or *missionary*, is growing quickly across various evangelical groups. David Bosch wrote in 1991, “Since the 1950s there has been a remarkable escalation in the use of the word ‘mission’ among Christians,”⁶ and this has only grown since then. Increasing numbers of churches, denominations, seminaries, and mission agencies use the term and explicitly adopt its core ideas. Even churches that do not use missional terminology evidence distinctive characteristics of the movement.

5. <http://www.missionalmanifesto.com>; accessed October 4, 2014.

6. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 1.

These missional ideas impact a number of aspects of church life and ministry, not the least of which is worship. Many church leaders today advocate allowing a missional impulse to drive all aspects of a church's worship including goals, structure, format, and musical style. In an attempt to squelch the fires of the worship wars, evangelical worship leaders call for worship rooted in the mission of God to the world. Part of the fuel for the wars is the constantly changing culture and a relentless tension between allowing the Bible to govern a church's worship and a church's calling to reach the increasingly pagan world for Christ. Recognizing the postmodern, post-Christian nature of the North American context, worship leaders are asking, "What worship forms will best accomplish God's mission in our culture?"

I believe that the missional church movement has had some positive impact upon worship in the evangelical church. As we shall see, it has caused churches to give much more careful consideration to how much of its worship methodology has been shaped by culture rather than Scripture and how it can recover believers' worship that had been lost in the church growth movement's evangelistic restructuring, while nevertheless making worship intelligible to unbelievers.

Yet in its noble ambition to recover truly missional worship, the missional church movement has failed to recognize how its own understanding of both worship and culture has been shaped by the Christendom and Enlightenment models it repudiates. Therefore, it is my contention that the full correction of errors regarding worship and evangelism that missional advocates rightly identify requires more careful study of culture and worship and their relation to evangelism from a biblical perspective.

The purpose of this book is to answer the question I posed earlier: How should churches today worship considering the increasingly pagan culture around them *and* their biblical mandate to reach that culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

I believe that the missional church movement has correctly identified many of the issues involved in answering this question, and their own answer has been perhaps the most influential recently. However, I'm convinced that their answer has some significant problems that, if left unchallenged, will result in churches both failing to worship God according to Scripture and losing their ability to faithfully accomplish the mission he has given to them.

For these reasons, the book begins with a focus on missional theology in order to evaluate its impact upon evangelical worship theology and practice in North America. After ascertaining common principles guiding missional worship today, I assess the strengths of this worship development and reveal weaknesses in three primary areas: its view of the nature of culture, the posture of contextualization, and the relationship between worship and evangelism.

The Plan

In order to get at the heart of this important question, I will begin by providing a brief history of the missional church movement, and then I will summarize and explain the theological distinctives that drive its practice. I will then show specifically how missional thinking impacts worship philosophy and practice by looking at what these authors themselves say about how churches should worship and how worship relates to mission.

This will lead to an extended discussion of one of the issues most relevant to this discussion: culture. Since how we worship and how we present the gospel necessarily involve culture, understanding what culture is and the proper Christian approach to culture is of utmost importance. The missional church movement's practice of worship flows from a particular philosophy of culture, and so I will evaluate that perspective and offer what I believe to be a more biblically faithful alternative.

I will then be prepared to offer my answer to the question under consideration. I will biblically define both worship and mission, spend some time exploring the nature and importance of the cultural forms we use in worship, and articulate an understanding of biblical authority over worship that relies on its guidance—rather than the surrounding culture—to shape worship practice.

My desire is to help pastors and other interested Christians wrestle through this critical issue of the relationship between Christian worship and evangelistic witness, especially in the context of an increasingly hostile culture. My goal in this book is to convince you that biblically regulated, gospel-shaped corporate worship that communicates God's truth through appropriate cultural forms will actually have the most missional impact in a post-Christian context.