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## How the “Let Us Worship” movement reveals our need for a deeper theology of worship.

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*We are living in changing times, where much of what we as a Church believe and practice has been thrown up into the air. What is both good and sad is that this upheaval has revealed that there are glaring cracks in some parts of our theology, particularly when it comes to our understanding of worship. Recently, this has been most evident in the “Let Us Worship” campaigns that have been happening around America, which rely – in my view – on an unbalanced and limited understanding of what worship is. This article highlights some of what I see as the cracks that the “Let Us Worship” campaign has unveiled and attempts to encourage us towards a richer, deeper, stronger and more holistic view of worship.*

Since I started [Worship On The Streets](#) over five years ago, my passion has been to take worship outside of church buildings and onto the streets of villages, towns, and cities around the UK – and to encourage others to do so as well. The vision behind it is to invite people outside of the church into a space of worship, as a way of sharing God’s love, presence and power in everyday public places.

Given this, it may come as a surprise that I am grieved, embarrassed, and angered by the “Let Us Worship” campaign that has been going on around the US over the last year and by the influence it could have on people’s thinking about worship in the midst of the current global pandemic.

For those that are unfamiliar with the “Let Us Worship” campaign, it is a movement which is being led by the American worship leader Sean Feucht and involves him and his team travelling around America to lead thousands of people in large, outdoor concert-like gatherings in public places.<sup>1</sup> They are said by Sean to be organised largely as a form of protest against government decisions to close church services and/or to temporarily ban group singing in churches, during the current COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> These “Let Us Worship” gatherings have taken place throughout the majority of last year and have continued at the start of 2021. On one hand there are regular reports of people giving their lives to Jesus, experiencing His healing and love, and many people getting baptised.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there are reports of peaceful protests for other causes being disrupted and silenced,<sup>4</sup> a disregard for globally recognised public safety measures in the fight against COVID-19 such as social distancing and mask-wearing,<sup>5</sup> and requests from local church and ministry leaders for Sean and his team *not* to visit their city falling on deaf or defiant ears.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> You can find examples of these gatherings simply by searching for the hashtag #letusworship on most social media platforms (see <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/letusworship> for example)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.letusworship.us/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/sean.feucht/videos/676306273302841>

<sup>4</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2020/09/23/how-a-sean-feucht-worship-service-convicted-me-i-am-no-longer-an-evangelical/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/sean-feucht-concert-draws-hundreds-maskless-san-diego-1564092>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.redletterchristians.org/las-skid-row-doesnt-need-sean-feuchts-revival/>

Before the “Let Us Worship” campaign began, I had both followed and benefitted from Sean Feucht’s ministry for over ten years. I have listened to his music, gone to several events he is connected to in the UK, completed the online training school that Burn24/7, the ministry he founded, runs, and attended “Hillside,” a week-long worship retreat also hosted by Burn 24/7. I would consider the Burn 24/7 network to be a strong influence in my work leading Worship On The Streets and I have got to know many of the Burn 24/7 leaders around the UK. They have been nothing but supportive, encouraging, and prayerful for the work that I am doing. I am particularly grateful for those who lead and are a part of the Burn 24/7 communities in Durham and North Tyneside, several of whom helped shape my understanding about what God was calling me to with Worship On The Streets.

So in many ways I am someone who has sat “within the camp” of the Burn 24/7 network. Given that, it was extremely difficult to decide if – and if so, how – to write this reflection. It is not always easy to know when it is right to speak out against something, or when doing so is unnecessarily negative or even harmful. I am clear that my goal in writing this article is not to tear Sean Feucht down or undermine the contribution he has made to both my and others’ experience of musical worship. It is because of the apparent similarities between what I do with Worship on the Streets and the “Let Us Worship” campaign, the fact that part of my job involves encouraging other people to lead worship in public places, and the fact that I have encouraged people to draw from various aspects of Sean Feucht's ministry in the past, that I have decided to say something.

But there is more to it than that.

Even if you have not heard of the “Let Us Worship” campaign, you may have wrestled with what worship looks like in a pandemic. In parts of Europe and North America the government has had more say in people’s freedom to gather in places of worship than we are used to or (in many cases) comfortable with, and many Christians are wrestling with a sense of restriction and even indignation, outrage or injustice. It might seem like the government has 'shut down' or 'cancelled' our right to worship. It is this frustration and outrage that the “Let Us Worship” campaign has tapped into and for many it feels like what Sean and his team are igniting is a holy and righteous protest to discrimination and persecution. I do not believe that is the case and I believe it is really important to be clear thinking about these issues. Unfortunately, I think the narrative that the “Let us Worship” campaign is pushing around this issue is contributing to somewhat of a “victim-mentality” amongst the Church rather than clarifying the prophetic voice it is called to have.

This article is an attempt to summarise my thoughts on why I think the “Let Us Worship” campaign fails to reflect Biblical teaching on worship and why it is so important for us to get back in touch with what that is. I do this through five areas of consideration that I have come away with from my time reflecting on both the “Let Us Worship” campaign and what I believe worship looks like in a pandemic.

These five areas of consideration are:

1. What worship is – and what that means for us in times of restriction
2. Our responsibility to each other in our worship
3. The relationship between worship and justice
4. The importance of who shapes our responses, especially in times of heightened emotion
5. The call to discern what God is doing even as we deal with crisis.

This is by no means an attempt to be the final word on the subject, but I offer it as one more perspective in the conversation that surrounds the “Let Us Worship” campaigns in the hope that together we as Christians can continue the ongoing process of discerning God’s word and work in the

world during this time. I am a firm believer that whatever challenges we as Christians are faced with, there are lessons to be learned. For these lessons to be learned however, as well as to last, we must be still enough to allow God to speak *to us* and do His work *in us*, so that we might be equipped for Him to do His work *through us* in the months and years to come.

## 1. The “Let Us Worship” campaign presumes we are not free to worship, yet according to the Bible’s definition of worship, we are!

Worship, according to even the briefest look in the Bible, is not actually very focused on singing to God. Yes, the Psalms tell us to sing to the Lord (e.g. Psalm 13:6, Psalm 96:1, Psalm 100, Psalm 149:1), and there are examples of singing being part of worship in both the Old and New Testament (e.g. 1 Chronicles 6:32; 1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 5:19), but there are also countless examples of acts of worship in the Bible that do not include singing, just as there are also examples of sung worship that do not involve gathering corporately as an act of worship.

To take just a handful of examples:

- The magi "bowed down and worshipped" Jesus (Matthew 2:11)
- After seeing a miracle, Jesus' "disciples worshipped him. 'You really are the Son of God!' they exclaimed." (Matthew 14:33)
- Jesus' disciples "grasped his feet and worshipped him" after seeing he was raised from the dead (Matthew 28:9)
- Witnesses to another miracle "were all amazed and praised God, exclaiming, “We’ve never seen anything like this before!”" (Mark 2:12)
- Mary sang a song of praise to God in Elizabeth's house (Luke 1:39-56)
- Anna "never left the temple, but stayed there day and night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer." (Luke 2:37)
- The blind man who was healed acknowledged Jesus as 'the Son of Man': "'Yes, Lord, I believe!' the man said. And he worshipped Jesus." (John 9:38)
- Paul and Silas sang songs of praise in prison, and prayed, just the two of them, while the other prisoners listened. (Acts 16:25)
- The vision in Revelation (4:9-11) includes a vision of twenty-four elders who "fall down and worship the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever). And they lay their crowns before the throne and say, 'You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honour and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased.'"

Encouragingly, just this tiny dip into the countless stories of worship and praise in the Bible gives a wide range of worship 'forms' that we are free to emulate in the current pandemic. It shows that we are free to worship God in all sorts of ways that do not involve singing - whether through acknowledging and declaring who God is, fasting, praying or simply bowing down - and that we are also free to worship through singing on our own, with our bubbles or with larger groups online.

More importantly, a holistic look at “worship” in the Bible quickly paints the picture that worship is more about how we live our lives, how we relate to God and others and how we position our hearts than it is about our times of singing to God. Paul’s words in Romans 12:1, clearly summarise this when he says *“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.”*

Choosing to give our lives to God in surrender, in trust and in obedience is, as Paul says, “truly the way to worship Him.” Worship was never just about singing songs to God, and it’s the fault of the Western Church that we have made it so. As a worship leader myself, I know first-hand what it is to put musical worship front and centre of my personal devotion to God, as well as in my ministry. I have continuously had to remind myself that there is more to worshipping God than singing songs to Him.

It seems that as a Church, we have made the definition of worship far too narrow, far too restrictive and far too fragile, so that when something like COVID-19 happens and we can no longer gather together to sing, we feel threatened. We feel like part of our relationship with God, both individually and corporately, is being attacked. We feel like “worship” has been banned when in fact we are as free to worship God as we have ever been. “Let Us Worship” is just one outworking of that misconception. By equating singing in large, in-person gatherings with “worship” the “Let Us Worship” campaign is putting forward a definition of worship which only reflects a tiny part of what the Bible reveals about worship. Gathering to sing is one part of our many potential acts of worship, but what we really need is not permission to sing in large groups, but a far more robust, deep and holistic view of what worship is.

***Opportunity to reflect:*** *What does worship mean to you? Is your definition/understanding of worship something that could be enriched? Worship hasn't been cancelled and it never was - what might worship in a pandemic look like for you? What might worshipping God in your everyday life look like?*

## 2. How we affect each other matters to God, especially in our worship.

In many ways this seems funny to say because it seems so obvious, but we have to remember that our love for God needs to be reflected in how we treat other people.

When asked about which of God’s commandments was the most important, Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-29). In this, Jesus was highlighting that our love for God goes hand-in-hand with our love for our neighbour.

The Apostle John took on this theme as well when he said, “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20) This, again, highlights that love for God must be expressed by love for our neighbour.

There are many times throughout the New Testament when believers were asked to consider the ways their behaviour might affect fellow believers, and to adapt accordingly. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul writes at some length about believers’ mandate to be mindful of others in how they approach the subject of food sacrificed to idols, saying “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak...”

Another example is found in Matthew 12:1-8 when Jesus “breaks the Sabbath” for the sake of His hungry disciples and then goes on to use Scriptures from the Old Testament to explain His actions to the Pharisees who accuse Him of breaking God’s law.

Why is this important when it comes to reflecting on the “Let Us Worship” campaign and what our response could be? I believe that during the COVID-19 pandemic, this mandate - to include love for and consideration of our neighbour in all our forms of worship – means firstly that our efforts to serve those suffering because of the pandemic are *part* of our worship, and secondly that it is good for believers to actively choose *not* to gather in large, packed groups to sing together, especially without masks and without social distancing or hygiene measures, in order to protect our neighbours and communities. We have so many other forms of worship, and in current circumstances this one particular form of worship has the potential to cause real suffering for other people, especially the most vulnerable in society. Given how COVID-19 can spread and the consequences that occur when it does spread – including physical suffering, more lockdowns, business failures, layoffs, economic distress, mental health crises, exhaustion and stress for frontline workers, and for some people, death – our own lack of care about how we choose to worship could cause suffering for many, many more people than those who attend a service or event.

We are free to worship God and our faith compels us to do so. However, we are *not* entitled (and nor does our faith compel us) to worship God in this one particular form of Christian worship. This seems to be what the “Let Us Worship” campaign is advocating for. Nor are we entitled to dismiss the claims of our own Scriptures, which teach us that our acts of worship are only meaningful when we are also living a lifestyle of worship - including serving those in need, thankfulness and self-sacrifice. *Wanting* something that we are being asked to *temporarily* give up is hard but is not a reason to break these principles.

In my own ministry with Worship On The Streets, this has meant some difficult decisions. I like many other churches, ministries and leaders, have had to make difficult decisions about what ministry would look like going forward. In the end, it simply came down to this. The same love that in normal times compels me to want to go out onto the streets to worship God and share His love with people through singing, in this season now compels me to stay at home and ensure I play my part in containing the virus, so that more lives can be saved, so that the health care capacity can be rebuilt, and so that life for every single person can return to some sense of normality as quickly as possible.

*Hebrews 13:14-16, “For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come. Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name. And don’t forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God.”*

**Opportunity to reflect:** *The pandemic has presented new and challenging opportunities to 'offer a sacrifice of praise to God' - perhaps through praising God even in the midst of loss and pain, perhaps through sharing with the growing number of people in need, perhaps through making sacrifices out of love when we haven't had to before. What new ways to share with or serve people in need have arisen in our lives recently? How might we worship God by loving our neighbours?*

### 3. Worship holds hands with justice.

One of the clear messages of the Old Testament prophets is that "worship" that is separated from justice is not pleasing to God. (That's putting it politely, which most of the Biblical authors that say this don't feel the need to do!) Listen to these stark and challenging words:

*"I hate, I despise your religious festivals your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"* (Amos 5:21-24)

*"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? 'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"* (Isaiah 58:5-7)

Although these prophetic Scriptural messages were given to a specific people in specific times, the principles hold true throughout many of the prophecies across different time periods, carry forward into Jesus' description of his own ministry (Luke 4:18-19) and are reflected in teachings throughout the New Testament (e.g. James 1:27, Matthew 25:36). We would therefore do well to pay heed: worship that is pleasing to God is wholeheartedly tied to good news for the poor, release for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

Some of us have heard these words so many times that they are now easy to skim, but do we understand that we, too, live in a time of indulgent extravagance at the cost of the poor, of too frequent corruption of judicial process, of oppression of certain groups to benefit other groups? Do we, too, "play at worship while living in whatever way that pleases [us]"? <sup>7</sup>

These are deeply challenging questions and need to be taken seriously, especially when we consider that 2020 was not just the year of the COVID-19 but also the year in which many voices that have been calling for justice for years have been heard and taken more seriously around the world, especially in the UK and the USA. Most notably, we have seen this to be the case with the dramatic increase in attention given to racism through the Black Lives Matter movement, but it is also reflected in other justice movements that seek to highlight the injustices of ableism, antisemitism and sexual assault to name but a few.

This is an important issue to raise because the "Let Us Worship" campaigns have been public about specifically and proactively holding events at sites of Black trauma, injustice and/or protest. Sadly, there have been reports that the Let Us Worship events have actually clashed with the Black Lives Matter protests, and that in some cases protests and demands for justice have been drowned out because of the loud sound systems that the "Let Us Worship" campaigns have brought into these neighbourhoods.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from <https://www.seedbed.com/worship-and-justice-go-together/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2020/09/23/how-a-sean-feucht-worship-service-convicted-me-i-am-no-longer-an-evangelical/>

“Let Us Worship” started with events that were focused on turning ‘riots to revival’<sup>9</sup> and this theme has remained part of it.<sup>10</sup> The exact theology behind targeting places of protest with worship events is rarely explicit. Sean Feucht talks about worship, prayer and kindness ‘changing the atmosphere.’<sup>11</sup> Some would argue musical worship brings God’s presence into a given location which in turn brings a level of experiential peace. Some see protests as primarily violent and believe people becoming Christians will displace or replace this violence. Some say Christians of all different colours worshipping together makes a statement in itself or can be an act that heals racial divides.

The important question it raises for us is "What is the connection between worship and justice?"

Personally, I do we believe that worshipping God is one of several good responses to pain and injustice and I have actively been involved in both on a personal level and in my ministry. I also believe that musical worship has the power to affect the atmosphere of a given location.<sup>12</sup> However, I also believe that this can be done in a way that departs from justice and from Biblical teaching. This is something we have had to and probably will continue to have to wrestle with in Worship on the Streets. In our wrestling, we have found the following questions to be helpful for discerning a response:

**Are we worshipping in response to our own pain? If not, whose pain is it?** When we choose to worship God in the midst of our own pain we are making our own, sometimes difficult, choice. That is not a choice we can make on behalf of other people. Sometimes we are actively invited by other people in pain to worship with them or even to lead them in worship, which is a beautiful, difficult and humbling role to play.

For example, several years ago, there was one occasion when we were worshipping in a city centre and we noticed a public memorial celebration was about to take place near us for a young local boy who had died earlier that week. We immediately stopped worshipping out of respect for what was happening and offered our equipment to those leading the gathering as it seemed that they didn’t have any microphones or amplifiers to use. To our surprise, the leaders then asked if we would sing “Amazing Grace” at the end of the memorial service. We were happy to do as it contributed to the significance of the gathering, rather than took away from it, and it was only done at the request of the organisers.<sup>13</sup>

When it comes to worshipping in the midst of pain, we must consider that if it is not our pain, and we have not been invited to serve those whose pain it is, then there is every chance our "worship" is silencing rather than supporting others in their grief and, in some cases, in their calls for justice. Remember that the ways we silence others are rarely visible to ourselves.

**What is God already doing? And what are other people already doing?** It is so important for us to humble ourselves in our responses to suffering and injustice. Instead of taking the place of leadership, let us learn to listen to God and to those who are experiencing injustice and suffering and follow them in their journeys. We must be careful not miss or dismiss what people who are suffering say because we are driven by our own dogma (much like Job's friends did throughout his journey with suffering),

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<sup>9</sup> This history is well documented on Sean Feucht’s Instagram (as of publication of this article).

<sup>10</sup> See for example: <https://www.facebook.com/sean.feucht/videos/god-is-turning-riots-into-revivalwere-coming-portland-and-seattle-this-weekend-t/732989230826852/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Whilst I believe this, I also recognise firstly, that there is at this stage, no fully formed robust theology that underpins this practice and secondly, that to a large degree, music in general, regardless of whether it is “worship” music can affect the atmosphere as well.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/bradley-lowery-vigil-newcastle-monument-13332099>

because it does not align with our personal experiences or because it makes for uncomfortable hearing.

Instead, I believe the invitation is to look for how God is already partnering with people who are being treated unfairly and to support the work of healing and justice-seeking that has already started without us. Let us also be wise to the fact that “support” can become “taking over” all too easily. For those of us who come from countries or contexts that traditionally play 'helper' and 'leader' roles, we might be tempted to lead worship front and centre, to jump in as 'teachers' or to think we already know what is needed. But if our worship and our work for justice is putting us and our ideas front and centre – if it's making us the “saviours” of the situation – we must ask ourselves how worshipful is it, really?

**Do we know what the time is?** The Bible is clear that there is a time for lamentation, just as there is for celebration. There is a time for grief, as well as for gratitude. There is a time for repentance as well as rejoicing. There is a time for protest, as well as for harmony. We must therefore be careful that we do not use acts of worship as a tool for burying our pain when it is a time for grief, nor as a time for distracting ourselves when it is a time for listening to those suffering.

On a personal note, I have found it hard to find worship songs that seem appropriate to lead with during this pandemic, particularly there are so few which deal with grief, lamentation or suffering. In light of this, I wonder whether this is an area where we in the English-speaking Church (or at least English-speaking songwriters!) need to mature in.

This has been a humbling section to write. In reflecting on these things, I am personally challenged by how easy it is for us to get caught up in our forms of worship and turn a blind eye to the injustices happening around us - on our streets, in our neighbourhoods, in our courts and in our countries. Can any of us truly say that we have not separated worship from justice? Once again, I am reminded that if we had a more holistic understanding of what worship is, and of what kind of worshippers God is looking for (John 4:23), then perhaps we would not be so quick to separate the call to worship from the call to seek justice for those who have been and are being oppressed.

As Isaiah 1: 17 so eloquently puts it, let us: "*Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.*"

**Opportunity for reflection:** *Are we, worshippers, amplifying the voices calling for 'a mighty flood of justice'? Is our worship transforming us into people who pay the very personal cost that can come with the pursuit of justice? Are we listening, as God is, to the cries of people who are oppressed in our time? Do we need to repent and change? How can we connect our worship with justice again?*

#### 4. We need to discern who we let shape our responses.

Good leadership involves pointing people in the right direction and trusting them to be able to walk in it. It might involve walking alongside people, serving them in their walk, or walking behind them and having their back. Good leaders remind us of why we chose a path and encourage us to stay on it when the going gets tough. They tell us the truth, even when it is hard to hear.

Mis-leading people involves pointing people in the wrong direction. It also involves convincing people that they are not able to walk in the right direction without the leader. Mis-leading panders to our fragility, our egos, our insecurities or our fears. It teaches us to listen to lies and undermine the truth.

It fans falsehoods into flames and uses them to create a force – which usually builds a narrative that elevates or excuses the leader. Mis-leading teaches us to think of ourselves as victims, as rescuers, or as both, instead of reminding us that we are all fellow sojourners on what is currently a difficult road. Mis-leading tells us that we are part of a group that is 'better than' or 'worse off than' other groups. Mis-leading divides us.

This pandemic has been hard on so many fronts and it is far too early to fully count the cost of all that has transpired. It has beaten so many of us down in all sorts of ways. We have collectively lost so much. We have been so disappointed. We have had to stare our helplessness and uncertainty in the face. It has certainly cost some more than others, but it has cost us all.

How tempting it is, then, in the middle of all this pain and uncertainty to find something to rage against – and to listen to those who validate that instinct. How tempting it is to think of ourselves as victims – and to listen to those who tell us we are. How tempting it is to write off people who disagree with us, to dismiss truths we do not want to hear, and to reach for blame. Anger and outrage are close siblings of frustration and helplessness and who has not felt some frustration and helplessness in the face of this last year? We are exhausted – collectively and individually – and it is easier to be angry than frustrated. It is easier to be outraged than feel vulnerable. It is easier to feel targeted than feel helpless. It is easier to lash out than sit with our pain.

Nonetheless, fanning our frustration into anger and our fragility into victimhood is not what we need. So when the “Let Us Worship” campaign states things like “our freedom to worship God and obey His Word has come under unprecedented attack,” or claims that social media giants are “banning our voices and outright attacking our God-given right to declare his goodness,”<sup>14</sup> it may sound like a bold and courageous cause to rally around. However, the fact is that when various states around America decided to stop close physical contact between its citizens by closing church buildings and stopping singing in groups, it was *not* an example of Christians being persecuted, an attack on religious freedoms or an attempt to undermine anyone’s right to worship. It was simply governments following globally-recognised and largely adhered to mitigations to avoid close contact between people, since that has been proven to be the primary way COVID-19 spreads. We – European and North American Christians – are not being discriminated against. On the contrary, nearly every demographic has been forced to make changes while our countries try to tackle the pandemic.

Religious persecution means subjugating, harassing and oppressing people because of their faith, their beliefs or their religious identity. Discrimination means treating people differently - and unfairly - because of who they are. *Our pandemic experience is the literal opposite of that.* Churches are being closed because ALL indoor gatherings are being closed. Bans on singing in groups apply whatever the reason for gathering. Indeed, whenever exceptions are made it is to *allow* places of worship to go beyond the usual restrictions rather than to target them for extra restrictions. This is the very opposite of discrimination; if anything, we are being unfairly favoured!

To claim that it is *essential* that Christians are allowed to gather for this one particular form of worship despite an abundance of evidence about the risks and the losses it could cause, despite the restrictions on everyone else, and even despite the efforts that have been made to make exceptions for worship...and to then say that any restrictions that safeguard such gatherings from spreading the virus amount to *persecution* is wildly misleading.

We must also consider how using the language of “persecution” affects those of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world, as well as people of other religions, who are genuinely being persecuted

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.letusworship.us/>

for their faith. Can we really compare the temporary close of our church buildings to the daily tortures and killings of people in countries where the practice of Christianity or other religions is forbidden? I believe doing so minimises the suffering of those genuinely being persecuted and, frankly, displays a fragile and ego-centric Christianity to a watching world.

With the “Let Us Worship” campaign gaining more and more momentum last year and continuing into the start of this year, it was only a matter of time before news outlets began to report on its gatherings. My sadness is that what the world is seeing is Christians fighting for their rights to sing in a church building, whilst casually dismissing and likely contributing to the devastation COVID-19 has caused.

The argument typically made in response to this is that the degree of restriction is disproportionate given the high survival rate among people who contract COVID-19.<sup>15</sup> But citing survival statistics callously ignores the impact of the rate of transmission. A small percentage of deaths among an incredibly high number of cases is still a very, very large number of deaths, disproportionately falling among the most vulnerable in society. Does the Church believe life is sacred and worth protecting?

Whilst we in the Church may know that this is not the whole picture of how the Church has responded around the world, many people outside of the Church are only being presented with what hits the main news outlets. In my opinion, sadly it paints a pretty selfish picture, and I am saddened to think that Christians are in the media for self-entitled exceptionalism instead of self-sacrificial service during this crisis.

To be clear, we can certainly debate how to get the right balance between the risks of spreading coronavirus and other risks (like the mental health risks associated with isolation and children being out of school). There is also a valid debate to be had about how many of these decisions should be left up to personal choice and responsibility and how much should be regulated and enforced by the government. But let us guard ourselves in our outrage and self-pity. We are no more victims than our neighbours, many of whom may be suffering as much or more than we are.

There are many leaders at the moment who would capitalise on our fragility, fear or frustration in this time and lead us to believe – in seemingly noble, spiritual terms – that we are hard done by. Let us be attentive in this time of heightened emotion about who we follow and allow to shape our responses.

***Opportunity for reflection:*** *How are you feeling? How are you tempted to fan those feelings into flames of outrage and indignation? Which voices in your life encourage you to do that? What is the truth? Which leaders are pointing you to God, and supporting you as walk with God?*

## 5. God is still on the move.

In Mark 2:22, Jesus says that “new wine calls for new wineskins.” In essence He is saying that when God initiates a new move of the Spirit (i.e., the “new wine”) in the world and amongst His people, it calls for new forms and ways of doing things (i.e., “new wineskins”). With that in mind, a final concern I have about the “Let Us Worship” campaign is that if it is so intent on recovering the ‘forms’ of worship that have been lost (for now), we may actually miss what God is saying to us in this current moment and calling us to in the future.

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<sup>15</sup> For example: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJhGMUCg90t/>

As we have seen in the very first consideration, a holistic and Biblical view of worship must make room for more than one expression of worship. By focusing too heavily on one expression of worship in this season, we could easily miss out on what God is doing in this season in other forms of worship. For example, we need to consider whether God is calling His Church into a time of reflection and stillness and therefore a deeper intimacy with Him (Psalm 40:10). Or perhaps this is a time of pruning in His Church (John 15:1-8) or a time of repentance (2 Chronicles 7:14). Or is this a time for mourning with those who mourn (Romans 12:15) and learning the long-forgotten language of grief and lament (Psalm 44 or The Book of Lamentations) rather than a time of the triumphalism and protest that the “Let Us Worship” campaign seems to be promoting? We must be open to the ways in which God may be calling His Church to embrace a new season of humbling, discomfort and uncertainty before rushing into the already familiar and well-trodden path of business-as-usual.

I am reminded that at the very beginning of the birth of the Church at Pentecost and the ushering of a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, the disciples were given one command – simply “wait.” It is only through the gift of hindsight that we know Jesus was true to His word and that after a period of waiting, the Spirit was given in such a fresh and powerful way, that not only were the disciples filled with the Spirit in a new way but also that same day roughly 3000 people had their eyes opened to the glory of Jesus and were brought into the family of believers in Jerusalem.

Whilst it is uncomfortable not knowing how long we may be being called to “wait” during this time of upheaval and uncertainty, I, for one, am worried that we may miss the fresh move of the Spirit upon His Church and the world, if through our discomfort, impatience or bad theology we fail to discern what God is saying to us at this time.

In many ways this year of disappointment, loss and lockdown has been a kind of “wilderness.” We need to slow down long enough to ask what God is saying to us in the wilderness, what course-corrections God would want us to make to help ourselves become healthier and more like the people of God He is calling us to be, and what lessons we need to learn that we can put into practice in the season we are coming into, however long it may take to get there. This is true for each of us individually as well as collectively as the people of God.

At this stage, I personally do not believe we have yet learned the lessons necessary to carry us through into the next season He wants to take us into as a corporate and global Church. It is my conviction, that there is a vast amount of possibility and fruitfulness up ahead for the Church, but unless we are willing to pay the price of being pruned by the Lord in this season, we may not experience His love and grace that we need for ourselves and may therefore miss the opportunity to learn new ways to carry His love, wisdom and power into a hurting world.

***Opportunity for reflection:*** *This has undoubtedly been a time of grief, loss and uncertainty for many people, on many levels – what are the ways in which either you individually or your Church community corporately have acknowledged this loss and brought them into your relationship with God? In what areas of life do you feel God has “pruned” you during this time? Do you have a sense of anything new being “birthed” or are you being called to “wait” for more clarity and direction?*

## A final word...

In summary, I want to say once again that throughout my years as a Christian and as a worship leader and evangelist, I have learned a lot from Sean Feucht and even more so from the Burn 24/7 community

he founded. The “Let Us Worship” campaign is far from the sum of his contribution to the body of Christ.

I do however, feel that what he has started with the “Let Us Worship” campaigns is emphasising an unbalanced and unhelpful perspective on worship during a global pandemic, putting people at unnecessary risk from COVID-19, acting as a bad witness to the world around us and could lead followers to miss what God is doing in His Church at this time.

I am aware that there are some people who might argue that God is clearly working through “Let Us Worship” because people are coming to know Jesus for the first time and are choosing to be baptised, many are getting healed both physically and emotionally, and there are reports of changed lives following the gatherings. Whilst I celebrate every decision someone makes to follow Jesus for the first time and experience something of His love and power (I am an evangelist at heart and have committed years of my own life working to this end), I would also say that it is my belief that God’s Kingdom comes in all sorts of ways even amongst our mess. I have seen God use my sin, woundedness, mistakes and bad ministry decisions time and time again. This doesn’t make me think that they were good things to do, but rather that God is incredibly kind, generous, and committed to people coming to know Him for themselves.

But – of course – do not take my word for it. It is clear that there are many different views about the “Let Us Worship” campaign. I encourage each of you to come to your own conclusions. Our research, discussion, reflection and prayer has led us to profoundly disagree with the response “Let Us Worship” has taken and I am concerned about the influence it is having on people trying to discern what worship looks like in a pandemic. My hope in writing and sharing these thoughts is to not only highlight where I think the campaign is leading folk astray, but also to help people prayerfully discern how we might respond to our current unprecedented times, in worship and in ways that align with Scripture. The future of the Church is being written. This is an opportunity to reflect, reset and re-align ourselves, to slow down, and to seek God so that whatever is built in years to come rests on the power and design of God rather than the impulses of people.

I want to finish with the words of Mother Mary Claire which were written over thirty years ago now, yet seem so prophetic and relevant for our times...

*“We must accept that this is an age in which the cloth is being unwoven. It is therefore no good trying to patch. We must rather set up the loom on which coming generations may weave new cloth according to the pattern God provides.”<sup>17</sup>*

May this time of uncertainty that we are all facing around the world, be for each of us, personally and corporately, a time to draw closer to God. May we have a vision that extends to the generations to come rather than just the comfort of our here and now. May we have eyes to see what God is doing amongst us during the changes and challenges. May we deepen our understanding and practice of what true worship is. May we become more wholeheartedly the kind of worshippers the Father is seeking and calling us to be (John 4:23).

Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> “The Simplicity Of Prayer – Extracts From The Teaching Of Mother Mary Claire” SLG Press - <https://www.slgpress.co.uk/product/the-simplicity-of-prayer/>

## RESOURCES

The list below of worship and prayer resources may be helpful as we seek to deepen our understanding and practice of worship. They have not only deepened my understanding and practice of worship over this last year, but also I believe they could also help steer us towards a richer and more worshipful life, individually and corporately, in the future.

### ONLINE MUSICAL WORSHIP:

**The National Heart Of Worship** – a network of worship leaders and intercessors with a heart to see 24/7 worship and prayer raised up around the United Kingdom.

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nationalheartofworship>
- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwxLzggL2Kcxhku68KulnZw>

**Burn 24/7 Global Worship:** a collective of worshippers from around the world who have a vision to “plant sustainable ‘furnaces’ of 24/7 worship, prayer outreach centres in every community, people group, city and nation in the world.”

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/burn247global>

### PRAYER APPS:

- **Centreing Prayer: an app that helps people practice Centreing Prayer.**  
iOS: <https://apps.apple.com/gb/app/centering-prayer/id844280857>  
Android:  
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.contemplativeoutreach.centeringprayer&hl=en&gl=US>
- **“Daily Prayer”: an app that enables people to follow a daily liturgical worship service.**  
iOS - <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/daily-prayer-app/id1437016829>  
Android - <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.rethinkme.dailyPrayer>
- **Pause: an app that helps people engage with God through reflection.**  
iOS: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/one-minute-pause/id1471913620>  
Android: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.ransomedheart.pause&hl=en&gl=US>

### READING:

- “The Reset” by Jeremy Riddle – a book that is a clarion call for a deeper and more refined expression of our worship theology and practices.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Reset-Returning-Worship-Undivided-Devotion/dp/1736266691>

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