

Musicians and Worship

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Foundations

How do we determine who should be on a worship team? While the Bible doesn't give many specifics, it does provide general principles concerning gifting and serving that apply to all ministry roles in the church.

First, in order for us to be “on the same page” (hmmm... is that a sheet-music analogy?), let's look at three theological truths that ought to be clear in the mind of every worship-team member: God's grace, God's calling, and God's glory.

God's *grace* is the foundation for our worship. 1 Corinthians 4:7 asks these penetrating questions: “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

We wouldn't be Christians—or musicians, for that matter—apart from the grace of God. The second chapter of Ephesians tells us that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8–9). It is God's grace that has turned us from worshipers of ourselves to worshipers of the true and living God. It's also God's grace that is responsible for any gifting we have. Peter reminds us that “each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms” (1Pe 4:10). As if that weren't enough, we learn in 2 Corinthians 9 that God's grace is responsible for any fruit we bear. It's clear that God doesn't leave us much room for taking pride in our position.

Second, it is God's *call* that brings us into any ministry role in the church, including the worship team. I may be convinced I'm supposed to be one of the Sunday musicians, but the strength of my feeling is not the surest indicator of whether or not I should be on the team. God is the One who gives gifts. He is the One who calls us to ministry, whether for life or (far more often) for a season.

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I'll never forget serving in a church with a guy named Neal. Neal was an average drummer, but an exceptional servant. He always did the best job he could. He even bought a new set of drums to use on Sundays. But he insisted that if I ever found someone more gifted, he would gladly step aside. Sure enough, a better drummer came along, and Neal willingly moved on to another area of ministry in the church. Neal understood that God's call was more important than personal preference.

Finally, God's *glory* should be the primary goal of anyone serving on a worship team. A tension exists every time we lead people in praising God. It's necessary that we be heard and seen, or there's no reason to be leading. But if our behavior encourages people to focus on us, worship has become entertainment. Worship musicians lead, but they ought to lead in order to direct attention to God, not themselves.

God's grace, God's calling, God's glory. Every worship team member should have a basic understanding and acceptance of these things. If we get these three foundations right, serving in the music ministry, or any ministry, will be a true joy—for us and, amazingly, for God himself.

What to Look for in a Worship Musician

We looked at the foundations for music ministry in the church—God's grace, God's call, and God's glory. If we embrace these three principles, we'll avoid many of the problems that plague music ministries today.

But let's get more specific. What kind of person should we look for to be part of our worship team? Typically, the first thing we notice is musical gifting. That's important, but musical ability is secondary to issues of heart and character. A phenomenal musician, with no heart for God, will actually hinder the worship of God we seek to inspire.

For that reason, church musicians should desire, above all else, to see God glorified. They should be passionate about seeing God's name honored, his mercies extolled, and his greatness proclaimed. This will require study of and meditation on God's Word. Therefore, our musicians should be devoted to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study. What we are before the congregation has its roots in our times alone with God.

A second attitude that should characterize those on our worship teams is humility, flowing from a fear of God. Something has gone tragically wrong when church musicians have a reputation for seeking the spotlight, comparing themselves to others, or needing to be handled with kid gloves. We have forgotten who we are before God, who esteems the one "who is humble and contrite in spirit" (Isa 66:2). To God, arrogance and pride look

no better in a musician than in anyone else. In his outstanding book *The Joy of Fearing God*, Jerry Bridges writes, “The fear of God and the worship of him feed each other. The more we fear God—bowing before him in reverential awe—the more we’ll be compelled to worship him.” Our temptation to view ourselves more highly than we ought has little to do with personality, temperament, or musical gifting. It has everything to do with how we view ourselves before God.

Another characteristic that musicians in the church should exemplify is expressiveness. Psalm 34:5 says that “those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.” We are not meant to remain emotionless as we exalt the Lord. The Bible overflows with references to passionate responses to God’s Word and works. Whether it be jubilant celebration before the Lord, solemn reflection, or repentant brokenness, a worshiper expresses his relationship with God in ways that benefit and edify others.

Finally, our musicians should be among the most grateful members of the church. What a privilege it is to serve God’s people by leading them in the public worship of our great and awesome King! In Psalm 50:23 God promises us that “he who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.” Gratefulness invites God’s activity. Rather than being known for complaining or backbiting, church musicians should stand out for their continued expressions of thankfulness for the gift of eternal life and the privilege of serving God’s people.

More of What to Look for in a Worship Musician

We’ve been discussing certain character qualities that every church musician should be pursuing. Now, we’ll look at four more: servanthood, faithfulness, encouragement, and humility with respect to personal growth.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says, “We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2Co 4.5). Here we see ministry defined. Whatever God calls us to do in the church, our purpose is to exalt him through serving others. Servanthood has been defined as spontaneously seeking to fulfill the needs we see in others. Certainly one of our greatest needs is to see more of the greatness of God. Musicians serve their congregations by providing skillfully played, well-prepared, sensitively arranged, and wisely chosen music that will enable people to cherish the worth of God. This motivation to serve helps keep musicians from pursuing the paths of self-promotion and self-gratification.

Along with other deficiencies, musicians have a reputation for being scatter-brained and chronically late. I know because I’ve been a musician for almost 40 years. During that time, however, I’ve realized that God has a different label for my problems: selfishness

and laziness. First Corinthians 4:2 reminds us that “it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” Being a musician in the church is an assignment from God. Being on time, calling to let someone know you won’t make a rehearsal, and keeping an organized songbook are all signs that we take our position seriously. In the end, faithfulness is an issue of obedience, not temperament.

Along with servanthood and faithfulness, God is seeking musicians whose lives are filled with encouragement. The book of Hebrews reminds us to “encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13). If we truly want to provoke worship and praise in people’s hearts, we will regularly point out evidences of God’s grace in their lives. That is the essence of encouragement. “I appreciate your thoughtful leadership... Thank you for coming early to help set up... Your humble confession of sin last night really convicted me. Thanks for allowing God to use you.” Encouragement is to be directed toward the whole church, but it should begin with other members of the music ministry. Worship team members must make it a priority to encourage each other. It’s one of the most effective antidotes to complaining and comparison we have!

Finally, worship musicians should be characterized by a continual desire to grow, both musically and spiritually. They should see themselves as perpetual learners. If a musician feels he or she has “arrived,” it’s probably true—but in this case, the place arrived at is called deception.

The more mature a musician is, the more he or she realizes how much there is still to learn. We will always be growing in our understanding of God and worship, as well as in our grasp of musical issues such as harmony, arranging, and style. We don’t want our pride to keep us from experiencing the joy of worshipping God with sounds and combinations we’ve yet to learn!

Being a church musician is no easy role. But the eternal rewards are well worth the pursuit.

Here are some books I recommend to everyone who is serious about becoming more effective as a worship leader or worship musician:

- *When People are Big and God is Small* by Edward T. Welch
- *The Enemy Within* by Kris Lundgaard
- *Sin and Temptation* by John Owen, abridged and edited by James Houston
- *Desiring God* by John Piper