

Closing the Gap between Pastors and Worship Leaders

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Part 1

Once there was a church where the pastor and the worship leader were not getting along. Gradually, their differences began to spill over into the worship service. One week, the pastor preached on how as Christians, we should be willing to go wherever the Lord sends us. The worship leader expressed his sentiments by closing the meeting with the song “I Shall Not Be Moved.”

The next week the pastor preached on the importance of giving gladly give to the work of the Lord. The response song the worship leader chose was “Jesus Paid It All.”

Realizing that people were beginning to talk about the conflict, the pastor preached the next week from James 3 on gossip and the use of the tongue. The worship leader closed with “I Love to Tell the Story.”

Finally, in disgust, the pastor told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The worship leader ended the service with, “Oh Why Not Tonight?”

As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. On his final morning, he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. For the closing song, the worship leader led the congregation in, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Sound familiar? Hopefully not. Certainly, it’s not God’s intention for the church of Jesus Christ.

However, given the fact that we haven’t reached heaven yet, pastors and worship leaders occasionally find themselves in conflict or confusion. Pastors can struggle with worship leaders who arrive late, don’t follow directions, and always think they need more time to “get people connected to God.” Worship leaders can feel taken for granted, over-controlled, and in the worst situations, like they’re competing with the pastor for time in the meeting.

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The thoughts and feelings above are often only the surface conflicts that point to root problems. These might spring from theological differences. Pastors and worship leaders need to be in agreement on issues such as the worship leader's role, the goals of corporate worship, and how the Holy Spirit is manifested during the meeting. The underlying conflicts could be style-related, due to generational, cultural, or musical differences. These need to be acknowledged and worked through.

In many cases of conflict the root issues are tied to sin. Selfish ambition leads to comparison, envy, offense, and slander. Selfishness in a pastor is often expressed in apathy and a lack of interest in a worship leader's responsibilities. When envy or jealousy is the root, the sad result is often a split church. Neither a pastor or worship leader is exempt from lusting after the gifting, impact, or significance of the other. The only proper response in such cases is humble confession and genuine repentance. It's God's intention that a pastor lead and worship leader function as part of the same team, not as opponents. I'll suggest some ways they can serve each other as they lead God's people in the worship that God desires. We'll just be scratching the surface here, but I pray the ideas we cover will be helpful.

Part 2

We're looking at the relationship between a worship leader and his pastor. What can a worship leader do to make sure the relationship flows smoothly and honors the Lord? Here are some thoughts.

First, realize that you're not the only worship leader. The term "worship leader" has developed numerous connotations in our culture, not all of them helpful. Even though I may be leading the singing during a part of the meeting, I'm not the only one seeking to encourage the congregation in the worship of God. It's the pastor's job as well! In fact, it's the pastor who is ultimately responsible for the direction and life of the church, not the worship leader. I found this quote from Ron Man to be helpful:

The pastor of worship and music should perhaps be called something like "pastor of corporate praise," in order not to confuse things, because not only his goal is the worship of God's people, but every staff person's goal! The children's and youth pastors have the ministry of developing young people into worshipers; adult ministries pastors should seek to teach adults to prize God and his glory above all things, and to worship him above all other pursuits; the pastors in charge of missions and evangelism have the ministry of seeking to multiply worshipers for God; the preaching pastor has the responsibility of publicly

cherishing the glory of God and expounding it and inviting others to share in the wonder of wholehearted, and whole-life, worship.²

I know the temptation a worship leader can face in thinking that the time of singing is *my* time. I'm familiar with the sting in my heart when my pastor informs me that we have to cut the corporate worship short. It's even worse when I'm told right before the meeting. My heart cries out, "But what about my plans! My arrangements! My transitions!"

"What about your pride!" God responds. Worship leaders serve as those under authority. A pastor should feel welcome at any time to interrupt or adjust what we're doing, because we're doing it to serve his priorities, not our own. God tells us in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Hebrews 13:17 is even more specific: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." In real life that may mean cutting the worship time short, singing a different song, one that you don't particularly prefer, or not doing a song at all.

Another way I can serve my pastor as a worship leader is by realizing that my job description entails much more than leading the congregation in worship songs during a meeting. A worship leader can also be called the "lead worshiper." I want my passion for God's glory to be reflected in the way I relate to others, the places I spend my money, and the activities I choose to participate in. It's a "life" thing.

Part 3

Occasionally a worship leader gets the uneasy feeling that something is wrong even when everything seems right. There are no dead spots in the services, the musicians are playing in tune, and no one in the congregation has complained for a whole month! But the pastor has communicated things are in a rut.

What's the problem? It may be that the worship leader is coasting in his calling. The pursuit of growth is a vital part of the worship leader's call, and a primary way he can serve his pastor.

Our first responsibility is to be growing in our knowledge of God. It's easy to assume that our present understanding of God is adequate for leading others in worship. But God is infinitely glorious and his praise will never be exhausted, even in eternity. Therefore, we

² Ron Man, "Worship and the Glory of God," *Reformation and Revival*, Vol 9, No 2, p 94

must study God passionately to worship him rightly. We must become faithful theologians.

Maybe you didn't realize that worship leaders were called be theologians. Actually, we don't have a choice. Every worship leader is a theologian. We simply choose whether we'll be good ones or bad ones. Obviously, a commitment to study the Scriptures is the most important element of a right theology. But we can also read the thoughts of others who have spent their lives pursuing a deeper knowledge of God. I have benefited immensely from books like *The Pursuit of God* by A.W. Tozer, *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer, and *Desiring God* by John Piper. Others that speak of the faith in a more systematic way include *Concise Theology* by J.I. Packer and *Essentials of the Faith* by R.C. Sproul. These books and more should be on every worship leader's bookshelf. More importantly, they should be part of our regular reading diet.

Another area we can grow in is our understanding and application of the gospel. A Puritan phrase that I've come to appreciate increasingly is "Labor to be affected by the cross." As a worship leader, I need to do whatever I can to make sure that Jesus dying for my sins is more than just a theological concept, or some distant historical event. Apart from the Bible itself, some of the books I highly recommend are *The Cross Centered Life* by C.J. Mahaney and *The Gospel for Real Life* by Jerry Bridges. Either of these books are guaranteed to deepen and strengthen your love for our Savior and his sacrifice.

Other areas of growth to pursue include musicianship and music theory. Certainly God's manifesting his presence in our midst is never ultimately dependent on our level of musical skill. However, musical knowledge and proficiency equips us with more tools to effectively serve God's people.

Finally, the most meaningful expression of support to your pastor, and perhaps the most difficult, is communicating a willingness to step back or step down if he feels someone else could do a more effective job leading corporate worship. As worship leaders we should be quick to encourage others who might do a better job than us. We might not end up giving God glory from the stage, but we'll definitely be giving him glory in our hearts.

Part 4

We've been looking at the ways a worship leader can serve his pastor. Now let's look at some of the ways a pastor can return the favor.

Some pastors want to turn the entire area of music and worship over to their worship leader. This is a serious mistake. In reality, God has given every pastor the responsibility of being the worship leader, or lead worshiper, for his church. A pastor may not be a

musician, but his love for seeing God's greatness proclaimed and responded to must be something others can learn from and follow.

Therefore, a pastor must first be a worshiper of God. No one should be more passionate for God's glory than the leaders of Christ's church. A church's experience of God will generally not go beyond the worship life of their pastor.

Certain characteristics stand out in pastors who are worshipers of God. They are more concerned about God's reputation than their own. Worship isn't simply a generic phrase to them. It is a way of life where every situation is an opportunity to express gratefulness for the gospel. They don't mind when they don't receive credit as long as their Savior's name is being lifted up.

A pastor can serve both his worship leader and his church by taking time to carefully choose the right worship leader. Too many churches have a "revolving door policy" for worship leaders that is the result of poor planning or research. A pastor should look for someone who loves God's glory, and is not striving after personal recognition. In other words, if someone wants to lead worship in your church because he loves the spotlight and attention, he is the wrong person for the job, no matter how gifted he is. Other areas to evaluate are family life, faithfulness in Bible study and prayer, and leadership gifting. A worship leader is meant to be an example for the church. When people see a contradiction between the way a person appears on stage and the way he lives, it will undercut his effectiveness, and more importantly, dishonor the name of Christ. Only after these areas are considered should a pastor evaluate musical gifting. Spiritual maturity can make up for lack of musicianship, but the reverse is never true.

Once the right worship leader has been chosen, a pastor should take the responsibility to train him theologically. Here's a sobering quote from John Witoliet:

Many worship leaders can't name a single book on the theology of worship. Most denominations (admirably) require preachers to pursue rigorous seminary studies before preaching. Yet we require of worship leaders only that they be willing to attend a single rehearsal or committee meeting. We would do well to lovingly challenge our worship leaders to grow in the knowledge and love of God.³

A wise pastor provides book allowance for his worship leader and recommendations on what to read. I know I have benefited from reading books not just on worship, but on topics such as the cross, sanctification, and the Holy Spirit. It's also a good idea to attend conferences with your worship leader that will foster discussion and strengthen your relationship.

³ "Discerning the Spirits," *Reformation and Revival*, Vol 9, No 2, p 19

Part 5

We saw that a pastor must be the lead worshiper for his church, choose his worship leader carefully, and take responsibility to train him. Now we'll look at the complementary areas of encouragement and evaluation.

If you're a pastor, your worship leader is God's gift to you. Encouragement will enable him to function at his best. Hebrews 3:13 tells us that exhorting or encouraging others will keep them from being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." If you don't want a worship leader struggling with comparison, bitterness, discouragement, or envy, try encouraging him. You'll be amazed at the results.

You might be saying, "You don't know my worship leader." That's true. But I do know that the apostle Paul, when writing a primarily corrective letter to the Corinthian church, started out by telling them, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus" (1Co 1:4). If Paul could encourage the Corinthians, you can encourage your worship leader.

Look for areas where you see God at work. Maybe it's in his growing understanding and application of God's Word. Perhaps it was a creative musical idea. Every time my senior pastor, C.J. Mahaney, encourages me for stretching out musically, it increases my desire to find new ways to express God's glory. If your worship leader tends to be tied to his plan every week, pour on the accolades when he does something spontaneous. On the other hand, if he unexpectedly stays within the allotted time one Sunday, let him know how appreciative you are. By the way, a generous budget for CDs, tapes, and equipment is a great encouragement to a worship leader!

Encouragement has the greatest impact when it's a way of life. Look for every opportunity to point out what your worship leader is doing right. This isn't pragmatism; this is the way God has treated us (Ro 15:7; Eph 5:1-2). Express your encouragement privately as well as publicly. Tell the church how grateful you are for your worship leader's preparation, diligence, and example. Mention gifting, but don't major on it. You want people to respect your worship leader because of his godly character, not simply because he has musical ability or can sing well.

Faithful encouragement will open the door for constructive evaluation. To serve a worship leader effectively, a pastor *must* be able to give him observations and input. This begins in the planning of the songs. The senior pastor should take responsibility for helping the worship leader choose songs that will most benefit the congregation. Whether a pastor simply comes up with a list of songs, or reviews one put together by his worship leader, depends on the maturity and trust of the relationship.

After a meeting, it's wisdom to talk as soon as possible about the things that could have gone better. Even if a certain situation might never arise again, communication about what went wrong can help establish trust and teach discernment.

Specific observations are the most helpful. Simply telling your worship leader, "It didn't feel like the Holy Spirit," is vague enough to be completely useless. Also, pointing out patterns will serve a worship leader far better than criticizing every single mistake you noticed. Remember how you'd want others to treat you. That thought alone should help a pastor balance his evaluation with large doses of encouragement.

Part 6

We've been taking time to explore the vital relationship between pastors and worship leaders. Along the way, we've seen that it takes wisdom, effort, and humility on both sides to insure a smoothly functioning team that can serve the church effectively. Here are a few closing thoughts to consider.

Where there have been misunderstandings or disagreements, it's wise to set aside time to talk through the reasons. If you've sinned against your pastor or worship leader, specific confession and repentance are vital to working together. Acknowledge where you've sought your own way, or your own recognition. Seek to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3).

God has called pastors and worship leaders together to work as a team to serve his church. It's not unlike the coach of a football team. He assigns every member a specific part to play, all contributing to the one goal of winning the game. Being on the offensive line is certainly not as glamorous as being the quarterback or a receiver, but unless the quarterback receives adequate protection he has no hope of being effective. Our goal is not to protect or seek our own glory or desires, but God's.

When it comes to music, God's desires seem to be fairly broad. No musical style or order of service is prohibited or singled out by Scripture as being preferable. Pastors and worship leaders should work together humbly and wisely to determine what is best for their congregation.

The Scriptures include or allude to just about every approach to worship there is: organized, spontaneous, public, private, simple, complex, ornate, or plain. Yet there is no comment anywhere about any one way being preferred over another.

Rather, it is the spiritual condition of the worshiper that determines whether or not God is at work.⁴

In the end, a humble, submitted attitude brings more glory to God than singing a particular style or a particular song. However, a worship leader must remember that he exists to serve his pastor in his efforts to see God glorified in the church.

Many pastors of small churches or church plants find themselves serving both as pastor and as worship leader on a Sunday morning. If you're in a church where you have someone to co-labor with, thank God regularly for that opportunity. Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!" No one gets it right all the time. Be thankful that on days when you're off, your pastor or worship leader is on!

Finally, we can take joy in realizing that the worship of God in your church is not ultimately dependent on a worship leader or the pastor, but on the fact that Jesus Christ has purchased for his Father a people from every tribe, language, tongue and nation who will declare the excellencies of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (Rev 5:9, 1Pe 2:9). Our sin-stained offerings have been perfected through his atoning work. As we labor together to see God exalted in our churches, our very lives will be an offering that brings God pleasure. May it be so, for the Lord's glory.

⁴ Harold Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, p 146