

# What Does a Worship Leader Do?

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## Part 1

This year marks a quarter-century that I've been leading worship—in one form or another—and how things have changed! Twenty-five years ago the first release from Integrity's Hosanna Music was almost a decade away, "worship artist" was an unknown concept, and brief Scripture choruses (repeated many, many times) were the hottest thing going. No one could have predicted how worship and music styles would become such a pervasive, and often divisive, issue in the church. Today, in the midst of this "worship explosion," we're better off in many ways. We have an ever-increasing number of contemporary songs that express the truths of our faith in powerful and moving ways. Churches and church leaders are recognizing the importance of worshiping God in every aspect of life. Many people, especially teens and twenty-somethings, are flocking to Christian concerts and buying CDs that point them to worshiping the Savior rather than the singer.

All these changes have heightened the significance of the worship leader. While we used to think that anyone who knew how to play an acoustic guitar (and owned one) could do a great job leading worship, we've realized there are a few more questions to consider. What's the difference between a song leader and a "lead worshiper"? Is the goal actually to "lead" or to simply get out of the way and let God do his thing? Does a worship leader need to be a skilled musician?

I do not assume that everyone who reads this column is a worship leader—I know some of you aren't. However, every Christian can benefit from understanding what our goals ought to be as we gather to exalt and give glory to God in public worship. Who knows—this series may even cause you to think about whether or not you *should* be a worship leader!

Churches have taken a wide variety of approaches to the role of the worship leader. Choir directors, accompanists, rock bands, soloists, and organists have all been included in that

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category. Regardless of the title, those who lead the singing and the worship of God play a prominent role in most Christian gatherings. At every meeting they have significant opportunities to teach, train, and encourage Christians in giving God the glory we were created to give him.

The New Testament gives us little to go on to establish the specific job description of a worship leader. However, it's apparent throughout Scripture that singing is important to God, and that it is usually led. Ephesians 4:11–13 tells us that God has given gifts to certain leaders in the church for the maturing and building up of his people. Some of those gifts are pastoring, teaching, prophesying, and evangelizing. In a corporate worship leader we have a leadership role which combines aspects of these and other New Testament gifts in the context of music.

More specifically, I believe the role and goals of a worship leader can be described in this way:

*An effective worship leader,  
aided and led by the Holy Spirit,  
skillfully combines biblical truth with music  
to magnify the worth of God and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ,  
thereby motivating the gathered church  
to join him in proclaiming and cherishing the truth about God  
and seeking to live all of life for the glory of God.*

We'll spend the next few weeks unpacking this definition and gaining a clearer understanding of God's purpose for the role of worship leader in the church today.

## Part 2

It's not just "worship leading." It's leading people. The question is, in what direction?

What does it mean to be a leader? When someone takes a position in front of a group of people, he will, to one degree or another, be leading, whether intentionally or not. Romans 12:6 says leaders must lead with zeal (ESV), or govern diligently (NIV). Both phrases speak of faithfully seeking to direct a meeting. The first duty of a worship leader is to take on that responsibility cheerfully.

Congregational worship in spirit and truth doesn't just "happen." God can at any moment choose to manifest his presence in our midst, but he has identified specific activities and attitudes to which he generally responds. Critical words, for example, quench the Spirit,

while praise invites his activity and involvement. Thus, there must be intentionality and purpose behind what a worship leader does.

Everything ultimately *glorifies* God (for example, all sin and rebellion is eventually judged by God, thus magnifying his holiness)...but not everything *worships* God. Worship is all I know of me *responding* to all God has shown me of himself. This response involves a choice, and the use of my mind, will, and emotions. Thus, everything a worship leader does should encourage that response in the people he is leading.

Since we're leading people (and not just "leading worship"), we need to be clear on what direction we're taking them in. It's easy to overuse vague phrases that sound good but don't necessarily define where we're going or what we're doing. For example, in recent years "entering in" has become synonymous with the corporate worship experience. But what do we mean by that phrase? Are we entering in to some mindless, automatic-pilot state of ecstasy? Are we perhaps passing through the outer courts of worship to enter in to the holy of holies?

Both concepts are commonly voiced today. But did you know that neither one finds support in Scripture?

First, worship is neither automatic nor mindless—it's intentional, purposeful, and very much involves the mind. And second, Jesus has already entered the holy of holies for us (Heb. 10:19–22). The purpose of worship is to enter in to a fresh awareness of who God is, what he has done, and how that affects our past, present, and future.

Finally, a worship leader's task involves leading people effectively. We should expect good fruit from our labors. Worship leading is not a hit-or-miss proposition. God desires to bless us with his manifest presence when we gather to worship him.

When we moved into our new home several years ago, my family's yard was a wasteland. But each fall I aerated, fertilized, and planted grass seed. In the spring I applied fertilizer and weed killer. For a few years it seemed like not much was happening. But here we are five years later with a full lawn. What happened? I sowed, and tended, and then I reaped.

So it is with worship. If we want God's people to glorify him, we must sow to his glory. We must paint a compelling, attractive, grand, biblical picture of our great God and Savior.

### Part 3

Apart from the activity of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to worship God. Paul tells us in Philippians 3:3, “For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” Gordon Fee writes, “For Paul, the gathered church was first of all a worshiping community; and the key to their worship was the presence of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> But what does it mean to worship by the Spirit of God?

In his 1980 book, *O Come Let Us Worship*, Professor Robert Rayburn sheds light on the relationship between our worship and the Spirit of God. “The enabling of the Holy Spirit, so essential to true Christian worship, according to the Scriptures, means that worship is not just an act of man alone, but in it man is moved and enabled by the Spirit of God. If worshipers are not consciously dependent upon the Holy Spirit, their worship is not truly Christian.”<sup>3</sup>

If we don’t recognize our need for the Holy Spirit’s involvement as we worship him, what we’re doing can’t be defined as Christian worship. Certainly if Christians in general need the Holy Spirit to worship God, it must be true of the one who is leading them in public praise.

In practice, this involves listening for the direction of the Holy Spirit before, during, and at the close of the meeting. This is not about whether you consider yourself charismatic, nor is it about tossing scriptural principles to the wind and trusting your “spiritual knower.” Rather, this is what the Bible clearly teaches. We *must* in some way be aware of the Holy Spirit’s presence and active involvement in what we do as we gather to worship God.

Some worship leaders excel at having every song, transition, arrangement, and word planned out before the meeting begins. Others thrive on the spontaneous aspects of corporate worship, disdaining all advance preparation and study. The truth is, planning and spontaneity are both important. We must be diligent to plan—without being ruled by our plan. The Holy Spirit wants to be involved in all aspects of our worship. This marks the difference between simply singing songs and expecting God to interact with us.

To be aided and led by the Holy Spirit is also to resist the urge to become familiar with what we do, as though our actions were totally responsible for what transpires during our time together. We need a better reason to do a song than “it really got people going last week.” While songs, format, settings, and sound are important, none of them make the involvement of God’s Holy Spirit any less crucial.

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, p 884

<sup>3</sup> Robert Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, p 22

Similarly, leading worship is more than uttering all the right phrases. It involves responding to God's spontaneous initiatives and promptings. A phrase that inspired faith last week may sound flat and uninspired this week. What part of his truth and character does God want to bring to the forefront of people's minds *this* week, and what is the best way to do it? That is the question we seek to answer as we are aided and led by the Holy Spirit.

## Part 4

The Word of God must always be the central element informing our worship of God. God had the Israelites place the Ten Commandments right at the center of the Tabernacle. God revealed his glory to Moses through a theologically precise definition of his character (Ex 34:6–8). Paul exhorts us to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col 3:16). It's clear that God gave us his Word to guide, define, and fill our worship.

A God-honoring worship leader places a high value on biblical lyrics—lyrics that derive from Scripture, either directly or in essence. It's not enough to sing words that sound good, feel good, or fit well with the melody. Singing is meant to define our relationship with God not only in terms of how we feel, but also in terms of what we think.

I try to listen to as many new recorded worship songs as possible. While there are some great songs emerging, in many songs biblical truth takes a back seat to musical production, emotional impact, or connecting with an audience.

Some song lyrics focus almost exclusively on our emotional response (e.g. “I long to feel Your intimate touch, it's You I need so much”). Others use biblical terms out of context or without explanation, and some use phrases that are too vague to really be helpful.

It's not too unusual for a worship song to speak of God using a human superlative, but in a way that actually degrades him (although I'm sure that was not the intention of the composer). For example, if I write a song extolling Jesus as my “hero,” it may sound like praise, but it falls so short of the biblical presentation of Christ as to be both disrespectful and sadly revealing of my own low view of God. Yes, people can relate to a “hero,” but the term simply fails to communicate anything essential about the great Creator-Redeemer who laid aside his glory to die in my place and save me from eternal damnation. Surely we can find stronger, loftier, more biblical words to use when seeking to worship him.

Worship leaders, without becoming overly critical or analytical, are responsible to use songs that draw our attention to God through clear, theologically driven lyrics that balance objective truth and subjective response.

Along with using biblical lyrics, an effective worship leader incorporates the Word of God into a time of worship in other ways. Reading Scripture in the midst of singing can provide a powerful focus that stirs faith in people's hearts. It's easy for worship leaders to talk so much that it becomes a distraction, but a brief exhortation or explanation can also clarify, connect songs, bring focus, and provoke passion. If I share something during or between songs, I want to be sure my point is rooted in Scripture, not just my own opinion or idea.

There's more we could say about the importance of biblical truth in leading worship, but let's move on to the role that music plays in a worship leader's job description.

## Part 5

God has given us music to develop and deepen our relationship with him.

In its most basic sense, leading people in declaring God's greatness and expressing our love to him requires no musical skill at all. A pastor or worship leader can motivate people to worship God without playing a note. This is especially evident in some more expressive churches where the pastor's preaching is punctuated by hearty "amens!" from the congregation. But even in more reserved settings, worship can and should be taking place with or without musical accompaniment. As author Harold Best says, "Christian musicians must be particularly cautious. They can create the impression that God is more present when music is being made than when it is not; that worship is more possible with music than without it; and that God might possibly depend on its presence before appearing."<sup>4</sup>

However, the Bible makes it clear that God loves to be praised in song (Ps 47:6; 69:30–31). Whenever his people gather to worship him, the sound of music can be heard, both instrumental and vocal. This is partly because music enables us to join doctrine seamlessly with devotion, and purity of truth with passion of heart. There are other reasons as well.

Have you ever noticed how often we're more aware of God's presence when we worship him in song? While that can be attributed to music's ability to affect our emotions, there seems to be a scriptural connection between hearing music and being aware of God's presence in our midst. We read in 1 Chronicles 25 that those who led the worship at the

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<sup>4</sup> *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, p 153

tabernacle “prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals” accompanying them (1Ch 25:1). Elisha was unable to speak the word of the Lord to the kings of Israel and Judah until a musician came and played for him (2Ki 3:14–16). In a similar way, our hearts are often opened to God’s voice when we hear music that reflects some aspect of his character. Ephesians 5:18–19 implies that our singing God’s praise is a natural response to being filled with God’s Holy Spirit. No wonder we often sense his nearness when we sing to him!

Music also functions as an aid to meditation and impact, by making repetition more enjoyable. A skillful worship leader uses repetition to impress biblical truths upon our hearts. Someone might ask, “What do you get from singing something the second and third time that you don’t get the first time?” My response is, “Plenty!” Did you ever read a passage of Scripture more than once? Have you ever experienced listening to a message again and benefiting even more? The same is true with singing. Yes, repetition can become mindless, unnecessary, or abused, but I believe it’s an area that more worship leaders could explore with great benefit.

This discussion of music brings up the question of musical excellence. How important is it? What does it look like? Does God even care about it?

## Part 6

There is biblical evidence that musical skill matters to God. 1 Chronicles 15:22 tells us that “Chenaniah, leader of the Levites in music, should direct the music, for he understood it.” Another translation says “he was skillful at it.” In either case, a level of musical competence is assumed. In Psalm 33:3 we’re commanded not simply to play the strings, but to play them skillfully. David was obviously an accomplished musician, who was “skillful in playing the lyre” and even developed his own instruments (1Sa 16:16; 1Ch 23:5). Those who served in leading worship at the tabernacle were “trained in singing to the Lord” and “skillful” (1Ch 25:7).

The Biblical support for musical skill is confirmed by history and our own experience. Skilled musicians are an asset to any worshiping church. But what does musical skill “look like”? What are the fruits of musical excellence?

Some restrict the definition of “musical excellence” to the realm of understanding theory and being able to read music. Others emphasize the ability to play by ear and spontaneously. Proficiency in either area is a big plus, but ideally a worship leader should be comfortable in both realms, and therefore have a greater number of tools with which to serve God’s people. My background as a trained classical pianist enables me to choose songs out of songbooks without having heard them, write out lead sheets and vocal parts,

and accompany special songs. My experience in playing by ear has helped me play chord charts, develop musical transitions, and respond spontaneously to a different direction during a meeting. Both have been valuable in my role as a worship leader.

Musical skill also involves maintaining a flow without interruptions caused by lack of training, experience, or practice. It involves knowing your repertoire well, including keys, melodies, tempos, and lyrical themes.

Musical proficiency also enables a leader to choose songs from a variety of styles and cultures, thereby better portraying the multifaceted nature of our response to God and his works. Whatever level a worship leader is at, the continued pursuit of musical growth should be a nonnegotiable part of the job description.

Obviously, musical excellence is a relative term. More often than not, it is a standard to be pursued, rather than a level that has already been achieved. Sometimes, congregational worship is led by a pastor having little or no musical training. Not every church can afford or support a worship leader teeming with musical talent. But even the smallest churches can teach that God desires our best and we are on a lifelong journey toward that goal. Again, Harold Best offers some helpful insight. “There is a distinct difference between the church providing a radically correct theological base for the best art done in the best way in a context of newness, and the church being responsible for doing this Sunday by Sunday, parish by parish.”<sup>5</sup> We are called to use the resources we have to the best of our abilities for the glory of God.

So, in our working definition, “an effective worship leader, aided and led by the Holy Spirit, skillfully combines biblical truth with music....” But to what end?

## Part 7

Magnifying the worth of God in hearts and minds is of first priority.

What is it that a worship leader is seeking to accomplish?

There are many seemingly important goals for a time of congregational worship. We may feel pressure to make every person feel welcome, to avoid “dead spots,” to honor God with our best musical offerings, or to ensure there is adequate time for God to minister to people’s needs. But nothing is more important when we’re together than to proclaim specifically and clearly why God is so great, thereby supplying our souls with fresh conviction to be satisfied in him alone. The first priority of a worship leader, therefore, is to magnify the worth of God in the hearts and minds of those whom he is leading.

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<sup>5</sup> *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, p 187

It's easy to view worship as no more than an emotional experience, or an opportunity to "enter in" (see Part 4 of this series for some thoughts on that particular phrase) to an ecstatic, peaceful state, but such thinking can easily lead to worshipping worship rather than worshipping God. Unless our focus on God is clear, specific, and intentional, we easily drift into thinking that worship is primarily about music styles, church architecture, and personal preferences. "We must not allow ourselves to be satisfied with vague ideas of the love of Christ which present nothing of his glory to our minds."<sup>6</sup>

Vague ideas of God don't serve us, and never lead to worship. What's more, we easily forget what he's like and what he's done. We say he's sovereign, then worry incessantly about that new noise our car is making. We know he is our Redeemer, but we can't shake that sense of low-grade guilt. We know he's omniscient and omnipresent, but we still feel alone as we drift off to sleep at night.

Every Sunday morning, a worship leader stands before people who have forgotten who God is and why he is so worthy of worship. That's one of the reasons we need to paint a clear, compelling, appealing, accurate picture of God.

"All true worship is a response to the self-revelation of God in Christ and Scripture, and arises from our reflection on who he is and what he has done....The worship of God is evoked, informed, and inspired by the vision of God....The true knowledge of God will always lead us to worship."<sup>7</sup>

If you're a worship leader, I'm sure you've had times, like I have, when nothing seemed to be going right. People aren't responding, your comments seem canned or lethargic, transitions are choppy, and you're beginning to wonder if you should just move on. What should you do? Try articulating some aspect of God's character you've been singing about—his unending mercy, his fearful justice, his abundant goodness, his almighty power, his relentless love. It won't be long before you and everyone else will realize you had been looking in the wrong direction.

Closely tied to magnifying God's worth is calling people's attention to the magnificent atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

## Part 8

The gospel is the central and foundational theme of worship.

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<sup>6</sup> John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, p 54

<sup>7</sup> John Stott, *Authentic Christianity*, p 250

Theologian Ralph Martin writes, “There can be no doubt as to the center of gravity in New Testament teaching on worship. The lodestone which irresistibly draws the New Testament Church to the recognition of God’s love and mercy is his saving action in the Son of His love.”<sup>8</sup>

The gospel is not merely one of many possible themes we can touch on as we come to worship God. It is the central and foundational theme. There are numerous secondary topics that will inspire our songs and hearts—holiness, evangelism, the beauty of God’s creation, personal ministry, our need for and response to God. But all flow from or are brought into focus at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Here are some reasons why a worship leader should seek to sing songs that extol, exult in, and expound the gospel.

**1. There is no biblical worship apart from faith in the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ.**

When do you feel close to God? When a choir sings? When candles burn and incense wafts through the air? When the band kicks into a good groove? The tenth chapter of Hebrews makes it clear that our nearness to God has been made possible on the basis of one event—the death of the Lamb of God on the cross. “We have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:19–22).

In other words, our sensory experience during worship (because of stained glass, friends’ faces, incense, music, etc.) all take a back seat to what we know—what we believe—the truth of the gospel. It is not our singing, attitude, earnest desire, or orthodoxy that enable us to draw near to God. It is the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on our behalf for our sins. Magnifying the cross confronts our tendency toward self-righteousness and self-effort.

**2. We are completely forgiven because of the cross.**

We do not worship God in order to be forgiven. We worship him because we have already been forgiven. As God’s children, holy and dearly loved, we gather together free from condemnation, guilt, discouragement, and despair. How we need to be constantly reminded that we are not accepted on the basis of last week’s performance, today’s promises, or tomorrow’s potential. We are accepted “in the Beloved” (Eph 1:6), and need have no fear of rejection as we come before God’s throne. God is able to forgive us

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<sup>8</sup> *Worship in the Early Church*, p 16

because he poured out on his Son the cup of wrath we deserved. And Jesus drank the last drop. No wrath or judgment remains for those who have trusted in the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. What cause for glorious worship!

## Part 9

In the cross, all the attributes of God shine most clearly and brilliantly

We began to look at the responsibility a worship leader has to emphasize the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. As author George Orwell once wrote, “To see what is in front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle.” Unless we are intentionally bringing the cross within our view, we will surely forget it. Here are two more reasons why the cross must be magnified in corporate worship. (Reasons 1 and 2 we covered last week.)

### **3. God’s glory and the redemptive work of Christ are tied closely together.**

As we set our hearts and minds on worshiping God, his various attributes can begin to seem contradictory to our finite minds. He is completely holy, pure, and righteous, and has an unending hatred toward all sin. Yet he is compassionate, forgiving, and tenderhearted. How do we worship God in truth, without minimizing any aspect of his nature?

We worship him for Jesus’ work at the cross. In that one event, all the attributes of God shine most clearly and brilliantly.

In Christ we behold the wisdom, goodness, love, grace, mercy, and power of God all working together for the great work of our redemption and salvation. The wisdom and love of God are in themselves infinitely glorious. But we cannot see how glorious they are except in the redemption and salvation of the church which is achieved only in and by Christ.<sup>9</sup>

As David Prior has written, “We never, therefore, move on from the cross of Christ, only into a more profound understanding of the cross.”<sup>10</sup>

### **4. The cross magnifies God’s worth and minimizes ours.**

Recently, I heard someone prepare a group for worship by referencing the pearl of great price from Matthew 13. He suggested that the pearl, rather than representing the kingdom of God, actually represents us. His view of the passage was that God found us to be so

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<sup>9</sup> John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, p 25

<sup>10</sup> David Prior, *Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985) p 51

valuable that the Son gave up everything he had to purchase us. I'd like to say that was the first time I'd heard that interpretation, but it wasn't.

God loves us, not because he considered us valuable (he considered us his enemies!), but simply because he has chosen to love us. Jesus' death on the cross shows how valuable God is, not how valuable we are. Yes, if I were the only person in the world, Jesus would still have come to die for me. But that's because my sins alone would require the shedding of his blood unto death. Why were we paid for with that infinite price?

"Because God loves us" is a true answer, but an incomplete one. Ultimately, the price was paid because God's holiness is infinitely valuable. He died in my place not because I'm so good, but because he is.

"God is love. But the supreme object of the love is himself. And because he loves himself supremely he cannot suffer what belongs to the integrity of his character and glory to be compromised or curtailed."<sup>11</sup>

On every page of the Bible are references to people. But in the final analysis the Bible is not about people—it's about God! In the same way, when corporate worship is rightly led, then even if the words we sing often reference us, we must recognize that they speak of him and what he has done. At the cross, who God is comes into perfect focus with what he has done for us, despite the fact that in ourselves we are helpless sinners and enemies of God. That's why praising God for the cross, properly understood, results in an ever-growing understanding of God's greatness, grace, and glory.

As a worship leader uses biblical truth and music to magnify the worth of God and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, a congregation responds.

## Part 10

Responses are to be informed and directed by the truth that inspired them.

At one time or another, every worship leader encounters a congregation that won't worship. While there can be many factors causing this, usually the single greatest factor is the leader's flawed focus. We've been discussing the worship leader's primary responsibility—to magnify the worth of God and the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. As this is done, the gathered church is motivated to worship God in spirit and truth. However, in my 25 years as a worship leader, I've tried a few other ways to draw a response from the people I've led. Maybe you can relate.

### **Demand a response.**

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<sup>11</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p 32

This approach minimizes heart involvement and maximizes external conformity. Comments like “Let’s really raise the roof with a shout!”, “Sing it like you mean it!”, or “I want everybody dancing!” may be well-intentioned, but lack any ability to produce true worship.

Scripture always gives us reasons to worship God. “Praise the Lord for he is good; his mercy endures forever.” Once a congregation has caught a vision of God’s glory, they may need instruction as to what responses are appropriate, but those responses are always to be informed and directed by the truth that inspired them.

### **Manipulate a response.**

Experienced musicians know that music can communicate and promote everything from peace, to passion, to frenzy. Actors have elicited compassion in an audience night after night through a single teardrop shed at just the right moment. Bands have brought millions of loyal fans to their feet through impressive arrays of lights, sound, and video. A worship leader should never look to music alone, to insincere emotion, or to an impressive performance to inspire worship in God’s people. Music in worship is valuable only as it supports or is related to biblical truth. Any emotion we exhibit should be our natural response to our understanding of God at that moment. Drawing attention to anything else—our musical gifts, the glory of our new technology, our “stage presence”—is only an idolatrous counterfeit to worshiping God’s glory.

### **Shame them into a response.**

“God has a special place he wants to show us this morning. But we won’t get there until our hearts are right.” This is an example of projecting guilt upon the church. The basic message is, “We’re not doing enough.” We respond by singing louder, crying harder, or jumping higher. The basic flaw is that it places the emphasis on the inadequacy of our work, rather than the perfection of Christ’s finished work.

After trying these ways and others, I’ve realized that the only effective and God-glorifying way to motivate the gathered church is to present a compelling picture of God and his greatness. This is motivating by grace and example. Unless I lead from personal knowledge and experience of God, I have nothing to lead people into. And my job isn’t done until I know that people are truly engaging with God, rather than simply being affected by their surroundings.

But how does a worship leader know when a congregation is truly worshiping God?

## Part 11

The worship leader might be more aptly called the “lead worshiper.”

We’ve been exploring the job description of a worship leader, and have seen that—and here I’m quoting our working definition—when a “worship leader, aided and led by the Holy Spirit, skillfully combines biblical truth with music to magnify the worth of God and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ,” the church is motivated to do more than watch. They want to get in on what the worship leader is experiencing! When a worship leader is genuinely captivated by God’s greatness and the glory of the cross, the natural response of a congregation is to “*join him in proclaiming and cherishing the truth about God.*”

As others have noted, the worship leader might be more aptly called the “lead worshiper.” Unless we’re actually engaged in worshipping God ourselves, we present no helpful example others can follow. The point is not to say, “You all should be worshipping God,” but rather, “Come join me!” Like David, our attitude should be,

I will bless the Lord at all times;  
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.  
My soul makes its boast in the Lord;  
let the humble hear and be glad.  
Oh, magnify the Lord with me,  
and let us exalt his name together! (Ps 34:1–3)

Biblical worship always involves an element of proclamation. We are doing more than emoting or having a “worship experience.” We are reminding ourselves why God is so great, what he has accomplished, and all that he has promised. God’s Word commands us, “Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day” (Ps 96:2 NIV). When we proclaim God’s salvation we are announcing to spiritual rulers and principalities, to ourselves, and to each other, that Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah, has triumphed over hell, sin, Satan, and the grave!

Yet we are not aiming simply to proclaim the truth about God, but to cherish it. It isn’t enough to be aware of what God has done; we want to be amazed by it. We want not only to learn about God, but to love him more because of what we’ve learned. Puritan author John Owen reminds us, “Where the light of revelation is not accompanied by spiritual experience and power in our souls, then it will end either in outward formality or atheism.”<sup>12</sup>

Cherishing God and his truth is deepened through extended reflection on what God has shown us of himself. That’s why it’s helpful to take time for uninterrupted focus on God

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<sup>12</sup> John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, p 115

and enjoyment of his presence. I've participated in worship services where we've sung doctrinally rich songs, but the leader gave us no time to savor the rich truths we were singing. I've been in other meetings where we had plenty of time for reflection, but little more than our emotions to meditate on.

Both spirit and truth are indispensable when we worship God. Both are the natural result of a worship leader who is proclaiming and cherishing the truth about God. It's something we should get used to, because we've been saved to do just that for all eternity.

## Part 12

Worship is what we do with our lives.

We've reached the last installment of this series on the role of a worship leader in corporate worship. We've seen how:

*An effective worship leader,  
aided and led by the Holy Spirit,  
skillfully combines biblical truth with music  
to magnify the worth of God and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ,  
thereby motivating the gathered church  
to join him in proclaiming and cherishing the truth about God  
and seeking to live all of life for the glory of God.*

Worship doesn't begin when the singing starts, or end when the music stops. We don't "do worship" in a meeting, nor compartmentalize it to the singing section. Romans 12:1 clearly indicates that worship is what we do with our lives. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Biblically speaking, there is no sacred/secular distinction in our lives. All of life is meant to be lived in the presence of God, for the glory of God. Everywhere our lives are to proclaim his praiseworthy virtues, acts, power, glory, wisdom, grace, mercy, love, and holiness (1Pe 2:4–12, Heb 13:15–16).

Although Sunday meetings often begin with a "call to worship," Harold Best makes this insightful observation:

There can only be one call to worship, and this comes at conversion, when in complete repentance we admit to worshipping falsely, trapped by the inversion and enslaved to false gods before whom we have been dying sacrifices. This call

to true worship comes but once, not every Sunday, in spite of the repeated calls to worship that begin most liturgies and orders of worship. These should not be labeled calls to worship but calls to continuation of worship. We do not go to church to worship, but, already at worship, we join our brothers and sisters in continuing those actions that should have been going on—privately, [as families], or even corporately—all week long.<sup>13</sup>

The goal of a worship leader is not simply to lead a congregation in enthusiastic song on Sunday mornings, but to inspire worshipers who will spread the sweet aroma of God's glory in the church and beyond through their words, deeds, interactions, and choices. Worship leaders can do this in a number of ways.

We can use exhortations, comments, and prayers to reference acts other than singing that bring worship and praise to God. Serving, giving, and evangelizing, to name a few, are all acts of worship that take place outside a Sunday meeting. We can also refer to life situations and draw attention to the fact that God doesn't change when we're in the midst of a challenging time. God is just as worthy of worship when our car breaks down as he is when we've gathered on Sunday morning. There are many songs we can sing that refer to the moment-by-moment worship in daily life to which God calls us. Finally, those who lead on Sundays can refer to other parts of the meeting as worship. "Let's continue our worship as we give our tithes and offerings." "Let's prepare our hearts to worship God as we hear his Word proclaimed." Comments like these help people realize that every act can be done for the glory of God.

Our corporate worship must encourage and flow out of daily lives devoted to the passionate pursuit of God's presence and glory. Therefore, our lives and our meetings are to be consciously God-focused, faith-filled, and God-glorifying. "Church meetings should not be regarded simply as a means to an end—a preparation for worship and witness in everyday life—but as 'the focus-point of that whole wider worship which is the continually repeated self-surrender of the Christian in obedience of life.'"<sup>14</sup>

Sundays are not an escape from the world, but an affirmation of our faith and an encouragement to maintain our confidence in Jesus in the midst of an unbelieving world. For God is worthy of worship not only when we gather, but at every moment of time, by every creature in creation, for all eternity. That mindset should be the goal not only of our corporate worship leading, but of our entire lives.

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<sup>13</sup> *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, p 147

<sup>14</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging with God*, p 220