

# OVERTURE: THE QUALITIES AND CONCERNS OF A WORSHIP LEADER

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This article explores the ministry of worship leaders in Canadian evangelical churches. While some churches have worship pastors, many churches in our country cannot afford to hire trained ministers of worship; but virtually all churches have access to *worship leaders*. In small congregations, the worship leader is often a volunteer who may, or may not, have training in worship ministry. Whether with worship pastors who have recognized credentials in worship ministry and music, or with volunteers without academic training, God has gifted churches with leaders whom he has called to help his people to worship him in spirit and truth. Their importance to the spiritual life of the congregation must never be downplayed or ignored.

This study has two objectives, each seeking to answer a critical question. First, what qualifications are required of a faithful worship leader? And second, how might churches encourage their worship leaders in pursuing these qualifications? Or stated another way, how might worship leaders engage with the churches they serve, in moving toward realizing these qualifications? The answers to the first question are found by a careful study of the word of God, by a faithful understanding of biblical theology as it relates to worship. The second question calls for great humility on the part of church leaders, congregations, and worship leaders who seek together to respond faithfully to God's call to worship him faithfully.

## **Setting the Direction: Definitions and Destinations**

What is worship? More specifically, what makes worship Christian? And what makes Christian worship *worship*? The objectives of this study will be realized by establishing foundational realities. The foundation of true worship is built upon the existence of the Christian God, the eternal, transcendent One who is the creator of all that is, who is three in one and one in three - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This transcendent God has provided the means by which fallen, broken human beings may be restored to communion with him - through the substitutionary sacrifice of his Son on the cross - and that his resurrection is the ultimate guarantee of all that he has promised to those who receive his grace provided through Jesus. These are the certainties that enable the church and its leaders to bring their offerings of worship to God, their adoration, praise, honour, and submission, along with their petitions, needs and brokenness.

Every one of the people in all the church congregations is a worshiper.<sup>1</sup> The question is, who or what are they worshiping. And will they worship well or poorly? Will their worship be experienced in a deep understanding of who they are worshiping, or a weak and limited awareness of the God who calls them to worship? Do the members of congregations demonstrate growth in their spiritual lives? Does their worship grow deeper, or does it skim the surface of engagement with God? These questions are not meant to discredit worship experiences. What matters is becoming better worshipers. Congregants begin where they are and grow from there. And worship leaders are called by God to guide the worshipers in the congregations they serve towards experiencing this kind of growth.

Experiencing authentic worship presupposes a heart that seeks to learn, a heart that is taught and nourished by sound biblical truth. Members of the congregation are to be growing in their knowledge and application of the Scriptures to their lives. The point of Jesus' teaching about the good soil in which the seed thrives and produces abundantly (Matt. 13:23) is that the person is prepared to receive the word. Preaching and teaching call for response; in the same way, the ministry of the worship leader, whether with music, the reading of scripture, or prayer, calls for responses that grow from a healthy grasp of the word of God. No one is exempt from the task of becoming responsive learners.

What is worship? This article considers three definitions of worship, each of which reveals a unique dimension of biblical theology. Each well-crafted statement offers a framework on which to shape the worship leaders's thinking about biblical worship.

### *William Temple: Worship That Encompasses Our Full Humanity*

The first definition comes from William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, who wrote about worship in his commentary on the Gospel of John:

Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of the conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose--all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Harold Best, "Nobody Does Not Worship" in *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 17-26.

<sup>2</sup> William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, Vol. 1 (London: MacMillan, 1955), 68.

Striking here is the effect of worship on the worshiper. Encountering God calls for responses to the various ways God reveals himself. Worship is something believers do, not something they observe. They are changed as they encounter and respond to God's holiness, truth, beauty, love, and purposes. They do not gather primarily to sing songs that prepare them for a sermon. They gather to open themselves to God as he reveals himself. And that revelation calls for a variety of responses: to *quicken* the conscience, to *nourish* the mind, to *purge* the imagination, to *open* the heart, to *devote* the will. Each action flows from "the submission of all of our nature to God." Temple gives a sequence of verbs by which believers encounter God: quicken, feed, purge, open, and devote. It is significant that Temple does not say "to worship is to *sing*." Might music help the congregation to quicken, feed, purge, open, and devote? Certainly, but in that case, music is a means to an end, not the end itself.

An important feature of Temple's definition is its holistic understanding of the human condition. Encountering God in worship is an experience that touches the conscience, the mind, the imagination, the heart, and the will; it acknowledges the whole of the believers' humanity, the need for forgiveness, cleansing, renewal, love, and purpose. Through worship, believers enjoy God's renewing work that opens them to his transforming work in every part of their being.

### *Daniel Block: Worshiping in Submission and Homage*

Old Testament scholar Daniel Block gives this definition of worship: "True worship involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will."<sup>3</sup> Acceptable worship elicits two kinds of response: submission and homage. To submit is to bow the knee before one who is greater.<sup>4</sup> Consider the responses of Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-4), of Daniel (Dan. 10:1-9) and of Simon Peter (Lk. 5:1-9) on encountering the holiness and power of God. Their submission involved a bending, a surrender of the will to God's holiness, authority, and majesty because of who he had revealed himself to be. Authentic worship involves believers submitting themselves before the One who is above them, beyond them, and over them. This God, who made all there is and who sent His Son Jesus to save humankind from their sins, is sovereign over all. Such a vision of this God is a call to bow in submission before him.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 29.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew term *hishtah"vah* means to bow before one who is greater. Its equivalent in Greek, *proskuneō*, is literally "to kiss toward." Both are gestures of submission to one greater. See *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Volume 1, edited by Robert E. Webber (Nashville, TN: Star Song, 1993), 5, 15.

The word “homage” connotes devotion and love.<sup>5</sup> When the members of the congregation gather to worship, they come together to dedicate themselves, to show where their homage lies. Each worship service is an opportunity to renew their dedication to the God who graciously reveals himself to them. They gather to remember, to recall, to remind themselves—yes, to relearn what they so easily forget. They might also say that in worship they *re-member*. To re-member is to reconnect with the members of the body of Christ, to renew their connection with the family of faith, as they consciously realign with the head of the Church, who is Christ.

Block refers to “reverential human acts,” physical postures that embody submission and homage to God. The members of the congregation bow, stand, sit, raise their hands, even prostrate themselves—physical acts which bespeak the posture of their inner person.

### *Constance Cherry: Trinitarian Worship*

In her book, *The Worship Architect*, now in its second edition, Constance Cherry gives this definition of worship: “Worship is the expression of a relationship in which God the Father reveals himself and his love in Christ, and by his Holy Spirit administers grace, to which we respond in faith, gratitude, and obedience.”<sup>6</sup>

Of note is the Trinitarian activity. The Father reveals, Christ (the Son) loves, and the Holy Spirit administers (gives/provides). Christian worship expresses a relationship with the Trinity. Worship leaders need to be fully attentive to this reality. Would someone attending the church service learn of the Triune God? Are the persons of the Trinity mentioned in the worship service, in prayers, in singing, in the scriptures that are read? Are the Persons in the Trinity addressed by name?

Worshippers express their relationship to the members of the Trinity in three ways: faith, gratitude, and obedience. Faith is a condition of confidence, assurance, and trust in the God who has revealed himself to humankind (Heb. 11:6). People sometimes ask “What did you think of the worship service? Did you like it?” The question that should be asked is: What did God think of the service? Did he like it? To speak about God’s pleasure in what is done, leaders need to talk about faith, faith to believe that God is who he says he is and that all he does is good. By demonstrating faith, the congregation worships. Worship leaders need to provide space in the service for the gathered community to sing, pray, and speak of their faith in God. Thinking of Block’s definition of worship, actions of submission and homage may be considered as responses of faith, in that they are responses to a God who can be trusted and who is worthy of our love and devotion.

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<sup>5</sup> Peterson, David. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 57-63.

<sup>6</sup> Constance Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 28.

Gratitude also is related to the posture of Trinitarian worship. The acts of submission and homage expressed in posture are not done from obligation or habit. They flow from hearts of thankfulness to the Father who makes it possible through the Son and by the Spirit for humankind to be in relationship with him. Worshipers may arrive to services joyful and satisfied, while others may come in the opposite condition. Gratitude is possible for both kinds of worshipers. Gratitude, begun by faith, is present and reminds the worshiper that God's promises will come true because God can be trusted to do what he said he will do. Worship leaders plan and lead acts of gratitude so that congregants can put both their joy and their sorrow in perspective.

The quality of obedience is present in both Temple's and Block's definitions. To "devote the will to the purpose of God" (Temple) and to act with "submission and homage. . . in accord with [God's] will" (Block) are acts of obedience. Obedience is a response of worship, not a technique to make worship acceptable to God. Following Jesus is to be willing to go the direction in which he leads. The choice to follow is a decision of the will to submit to God. This daily act of the will is worship.

### *Does Music Matter?*

Music plays a significant role in worship. It is common, when speaking about the worship of their church, for people to refer solely of the musical portion of the service. Worship is not to be equated with music. But neither is music negligible or unimportant. The following explores a biblical perspective on music in worship and the challenges facing worship leaders in the selection and leading of music.

Perhaps the primary challenge is the application of biblical and theological knowledge as it applies to music. How does "head knowledge" make its way to the heart and the realm of the body? Worship leaders are called to know, understand, and apply scripture to themselves and to their congregations. The worship leader, like the rest of the congregation, needs to be in a growing relationship with God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The content of worship, the planning of the worship service, and the leading of the worship service centre on promoting and shaping this relationship.

### **Setting the Direction: Musical Choices**

In his book, *Worship in the Shape of Scripture*, F. Russell Mitman proposes that in a worship service "all the individual acts, like the sermon, *grow out of* an engagement with the biblical texts and interact with each other homiletically and liturgically to enable the *leitourgia*, literally 'the work,' of the worshiping congregation to take

place.”<sup>7</sup> If, as Mitman argues, people experience God’s presence at every point in the service by means of the biblical texts, then music alone cannot bear the full weight of worship. But it would also be a great mistake to regard music as unimportant. Music is one of the primary resources available to the congregation to enable them to respond to God’s revelation of himself and his purposes, to express their devotion to him, to be instructed in biblical truth, to submit to God, and to live holy lives.

### *Towards a Biblical Theology of Musical Ministry*

What is meant by a biblical theology of music? Every song the congregation sings expresses a theology of some sort. Every worship song aims to say something about God, his attributes, his actions, or his purposes. A song may be biblically sound or theologically flawed, but in either case it shapes in some way the lives of those who sing it. The selection of music for worship is never a neutral decision. It has real consequences for the lives of those who sing.

It has been said that “we are what we eat.” It might also be said of worship music that “we are what we sing.” The songs sung in a worship setting have an impact in the lives of believers, for better or worse. Well chosen music encourages spiritual growth and moves them towards holy living in hearts that are responsive to truth. Conversely, a diet of music with shallow or spurious theological content leads to shallow spirituality and stunted growth in Christian character. It follows then that the worship leader carries a solemn responsibility to take seriously the task of shepherding the congregation in their worship in ways that protect the spiritual health of the congregation. John Witvliet refers to the worship leader as the “spiritual dietician” for the congregation.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to say that the songs chosen need to address the themes and texts of a given service, and to “address the weaknesses of (the) congregation while staying strong in areas of (the) congregation’s giftedness.”<sup>9</sup> The worship leader must take care that the congregation is well fed, and that worship provides spiritual therapy where needed, to prepare the congregation for ministry.

At the same time, those who are tasked with selecting music for the congregation to sing are often limited themselves by the songs they know. In many cases the choice of music may be based more on the ability and availability of those leading the music than by the needs of the service or the needs of the congregation. Two things need to be said in this situation. First, the choice of music should be

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<sup>7</sup> F. Russell Mitman, *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 33.

<sup>8</sup> John D. Witvliet, “Discipleship and the Future of Contemporary Worship Music” in *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise & Worship*, edited by Robert Woods and Brian Walrath (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 190.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-91.

based on the liturgy, and not simply by what the musicians are familiar with. If a particular song is needed, those who are leading should be prepared to learn that song well as part of their preparation for the coming worship event. Second, growing out of this responsibility, worship leaders need to make it their business, as a regular part of their role as worship leaders, to expand their repertory of music to serve the ongoing needs of the congregation. It also needs to be said, in this connection, that all who serve in musical leadership need to be working consistently to sharpen their musical skills beyond their present level of ability. Poor execution of music robs it of its power to work in the lives of the worshipers. In every aspect of leadership, those entrusted with leading worship, remembering that they are accountable to God for the use of his gifts, must never be content with “things as they are,” but must seek to cultivate excellence in the use of their gifts. “Excellence,” as Harold Best reminds, “is becoming better today than I once was.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Towards a Biblical Theology of Musical Leadership*

The New Testament says relatively little concerning the use of music in the church. Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-21 contain the most concentrated and precise instruction in scripture about the musical content of corporate worship.<sup>11</sup> These important passages describe worship ministry that is rooted in the scriptures as they reveal the substance of the gospel (Col. 3:16: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell in you”) and that relies on the presence and working of the Holy Spirit in worship (Eph. 5:18: “be filled with the Spirit”). They show that singing in worship involves the edification of fellow worshipers (Col. 3:16: “teaching and admonishing one another” and Eph. 5:19: “speak to one another”), and that singing embraces a variety of types of song (“psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”). These passages teach that while our singing has a horizontal movement (edification: “teaching and admonishing one another”), it also has a vertical (Godward) orientation (doxology: “singing with thanksgiving in your hearts to God”).

The Ephesians passage concludes with the injunction: “subject yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ (Eph. 5:21). The call to be subject to one another is a principle that is at the heart of Paul’s teaching throughout the verses which follow this passage, regarding all relationships in the lives of believers: marriage (wives and husbands, (5:22-33), family (children and parents, 6:1-4), and the workplace (slaves and masters, (6:5-9). To submit, in the sense Paul uses the term *hupotassómenoi* here, involves a mutual humbling in which “we lay aside our rights and humbly serve one another in love.”<sup>12</sup> Submission of this kind, as it applies to corporate worship,

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 108.

<sup>11</sup> David Pass calls Colossians 3:16 the “Magna Carta” of church music. See David B. Pass, *Music and the Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1989), 85.

<sup>12</sup> Steven J. Cole, “Lesson 47: Submitting to One Another (Ephesians 5:21)”, <https://bible.org/seriespage/>

stems from a recognition that every act of worship is a means of serving the community of Christ followers who worship together. Service may involve surrendering individual preferences in relation to worship styles; it may also involve being available to speak prophetically or offer a word of encouragement to another worshiper. For musicians, it could mean surrendering the impulse to draw attention to their skills. On the other hand, the artistry of musicians, readers, actors, or dancers may serve those who worship by enriching their worship experience.

Finally, all the actions described in these two passages flow from obedience to the principal imperatives which headline these two passages: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell in you” (Col. 3:16) and “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). Every worship leader must allow the substance of these two passages to shape their understanding and practice of public worship.<sup>13</sup>

## The Pastoral Worship Leader

In his book *The Worship Pastor*, Zac Hicks offers further insights into the ministry of the worship leader: “Each week, you put words into people’s mouths that become the language they will use to relate to God the other six days of the week.”<sup>14</sup> Over time, the music used in the service becomes a way for congregants to think about God and speak to him. The lyrics they sing become words they use and thoughts that shape their prayers. Hicks continues: “Each and every week, you shape the beliefs of the people who gather.”<sup>15</sup> We should not minimize the worship leader’s role in fostering belief or assign that task to the teaching pastor alone. In a healthy worship ministry, pastor(s) and worship leaders will be closely aligned in their focus, so that, as Witvliet maintains, the thrust of the worship service undergirds the focus of the preaching and also addresses the spiritual needs of the congregation,<sup>16</sup> as the preaching will do.

Many churches view the service order as two parts: Part 1, the music (the “worship” time) and Part 2, the sermon. It is a mistake to regard the musical component of the service as a preliminary to the sermon or simply a preparation for hearing the sermon. The music used is more than a “warmup” for the congregation. In many churches worship leaders are chosen primarily for their musical skill and ability. The title of Hicks’s book reminds that whatever musical skills they possess, worship leaders serve a pastoral role within the congregation; they are shepherds

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[lesson-47-submitting-one-another-ephesians-521](#), accessed March 29, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> A more substantial exegetical treatment of these passages appears in Appendix 3.

<sup>14</sup> Zac Hicks, *The Worship Pastor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Witvliet, *ibid.*, 191.



whose first responsibility is the spiritual welfare of the people who worship from week to week.

Constance Cherry describes the pastoral role of the worship musician in the following way:

A pastoral musician is a spiritual leader with developed skill and God-given responsibility for selecting, employing, and/or leading music in ways that serve the actions of the liturgy, engage worshipers as full participants, and reflect upon biblical, theological, and contextual implications, all for the ultimate purpose of glorifying God.<sup>17</sup>

Two significant premises bracket Cherry's description of pastoral worship leaders: first, that they are spiritual leaders, appointed by God and tasked with caring for the spiritual welfare of the congregation. And second, that the ultimate purpose of their ministry is that God will be glorified in the worship of his people. Pastoral musicians serve in three capacities. First, they select and lead music that is shaped by the liturgy, the service structure.<sup>18</sup> As Witvliet says, the music selected will "address the themes and texts" of the service.<sup>19</sup> Second, the ministry of the pastoral musician encourages the full participation of the congregation in their worship; and third, it provides music that enables them to respond obediently to God's revelation of himself and his will for them.<sup>20</sup>

The pastoral worship leader is called by God to provide a foundation of biblical and theological truth for the congregation. Worship leaders communicate biblical truth in an ongoing way through their leadership. I Timothy 4:13 calls for "the public reading of scripture" in the church. Every service order needs to include the reading of significant units of scripture, which may be read by the preaching minister, or interspersed throughout the service and read by people from the worship team, or from among the congregation.<sup>21</sup> The regular, systematic proclamation of the word of God is deeply needed presently within churches, where, as Matthew Crocker warns us, there is widespread biblical illiteracy.<sup>22</sup> This is true,

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<sup>17</sup> Cherry, Constance. *The Music Architect*. (Grands Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 3.

<sup>18</sup> "Liturgy" derives from the Greek *leitourgia*, literally "the work of the people." Cherry defines it as the "service", or "ministry" of the worshipers. Cf. Cherry, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Witvliet, 191.

<sup>20</sup> Cherry, *The Music Architect*, gives an helpful chapter on "Participating in Song as the Body of Christ," which addresses the task of helping worshipers to engage in singing, pages 215-34.

<sup>21</sup> Liturgical churches have an advantage here, as they have readings from both Old and New Testaments, as well as the Psalms and the Gospels, built into every service. Here, the singing is situated at points where well-selected songs can reflect on, and respond to the substance of the readings. Where a prescribed liturgy is not the practice, it falls to the worship planner(s), together with the pastor, to incorporate scripture into the service plan. See Mitman *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Crocker, *Foundations: 100 Days of Devotions Through Catechism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf &

not only for the members in the pews,<sup>23</sup> but often for the musicians on the worship teams. In many cases, they have relatively little biblical/theological training for the task of worship leadership, and are therefore ill-prepared to minister on a spiritual level within the congregation.<sup>24</sup>

It is significant to note, in this regard, that the primary training of many worship ministers is focused more on developing musical skills than on biblical-theological study. Worship leaders who take their role as spiritual leader seriously will devote themselves to the task of being students of theology, and using their learning of biblical doctrine in ways that shape their planning and leading worship. Worship team members who have a solid grasp of biblical truth gain skills of two kinds: they are able to recognize readily songs that express poor theology, and they are well-equipped to select biblically appropriate music for worship.

While discerning the theological substance of songs is largely a matter of the content of lyrics, these lyrics are always expressed musically. The faithful worship leader will be sensitive to the ways in which the music either enhances, or impedes, the delivery of the message of the song. Bert Polman reminds that some praise and worship songs are suitable for congregational singing, while others are more suited for performance, either in choral or solo format.<sup>25</sup> Some songs are not “singable” by congregations; the tessitura may be too wide for the average worshiper’s voice, the rhythm too complicated, or the melody too complex or difficult to remember. The wise worship leader will be aware of these constraints and seek to choose songs that encourage the congregation to sing. It is also the case that some songs lack artistic merit, a condition which detracts from their suitability for communicating truth.<sup>26</sup>

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Stock, 2021), Introduction.

<sup>23</sup> A recent survey by Ligonier Ministries, revealed that Americans in general, and evangelicals in particular, have a poor grasp of basic Christian doctrines. In this survey, evangelicals, in significant numbers, registered acceptance of the following unbiblical statements among others: “The Bible is not literally true” (26% of those surveyed agreed); “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam” (56% agreed); “Jesus was a great teacher, but he is not God” (43% agreed). See Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research, *The State of Theology* (biannual report on belief about God, salvation, ethics, and the Bible among Americans), published August 2022, <https://thestateoftheology.com>. Accessed October 10, 2022. See also Stephani McDade, “The Top 5 Heresies Among American Evangelicals, September 19, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/et/2022/september-web-only/state-of-theology-evangelical-heresy-report-ligonier-survey.html>. Accessed October 10, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Crocker, *ibid.*, advocates the use of a catechism (in this case, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*), not merely as a preparation for confirmation, but as a foundation for building a Christian worldview in the thinking of church members of all kinds. Studying the catechism may be one way that worship team members may prepare theologically for their ministry within the congregation.

<sup>25</sup> Bert Polman, “Praise the Name of Jesus: Are All Praise and Worship Songs for the Congregation?” in *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 127-37.

<sup>26</sup> See Guy Janzen, “When the Music Fades: the Artistic Worth of Worship Song Melodies” in *The*

Melodies that lack imagination, lyrics that are poetically weak, or lack coherence in presenting the ideas of the song work against the spiritual enrichment of the members of a worshiping congregation. The wise worship leader will recognize these weaknesses and proceed carefully. As Cherry puts it,

. . . within each genre of congregational music there are excellent choices, adequate choices, and poor choices. Not every piece within a genre is appropriate to use. Some songs contain weak or even bad theology or have lyrics that are not compelling or artful; sometimes the music is dull or does not fit the text well at all.<sup>27</sup>

### *Discipling with music*

Consider this scenario described in Mike Harland's *Worship Essentials*:

If someone attended your church, but only came to the music portion of the corporate worship time and derived all of their belief system from the theological content of the songs, what would they believe? How much information about Jesus would they know? How about the Trinity? The doctrine of grace? What it means to trust Christ or to walk in faith? Or would the music of your church only communicate to them what they should feel?<sup>28</sup>

Worship leaders are called to serve from week to week in a discipling ministry. Choosing music from a biblical and theological perspective means that worshipers engage with the entirety of God's story, in his activity of redeeming, reconciling, and restoring his creation.<sup>29</sup> The community of God's people sing to him in honor of his greatness and majesty. Music tells what God has done, it blesses the name of God, it gives thanks and honour to God, and it edifies the gathered community of faith through telling the full story of God's actions in our world, past, present and future.

The worship leader in pursuit of a theology of music first, recognizes that theology matters. Songs with edifying theology have the potential to shape and direct the Christian experience of all within earshot. Second, this theology opens them to a holistic range of experience in their worship. Along with those songs that speak of joy and praise in our relationship with God, they learn the value of those that express

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*Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 138-51.

<sup>27</sup> Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 203.

<sup>28</sup> Mike Harland, *Worship Essentials*. (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2018), 63.

<sup>29</sup> Keith and Kristen Getty are composers who seek to cover the span of biblical subjects in their worship songs.

the daily struggles of their lives. Finally, singing rooted in the word bears spiritual fruit in the lives of those who sing. Biblical worship opens a pathway to spiritual transformation.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Four statements stem from the authors' reflections on essential qualities of a worship leader. These are not a "checklist" for hiring a worship leader, nor are they a comprehensive job description of the role of a worship leader or worship pastor. But they offer an invitation to an ongoing conversation on the way a worship leader will seek to serve in the church.

*The worship leader is called to a ministry of spiritual formation in the lives of the congregation.*

Robert Mulholland Jr. defines spiritual formation as "a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others"<sup>31</sup> The ministry of the worship leader must be directed towards spiritual growth in the members of the congregation, not simply towards the cultivation of personal character.<sup>32</sup> Spiritual formation, as Mulholland goes on to say, leads to "responding in ways that allow God to bring about God's purposes."<sup>33</sup> The faithful worship leader will be passionate about knowing and fulfilling God's purposes in the church rather than fulfilling personal agendas.

*The worship leader is committed to the proclamation of the word.*

A worship leader does not work in isolation. The content of worship must be of a piece with the preaching of the pastor. Indeed, in Cherry's terms, worship leaders serve in a pastoral capacity.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, the pastor's preaching is one act of worship in the worship of the church. Mitman calls for an "*organic* liturgy," in which "all the individual acts [of the service], like the sermon, *grow out* of an engagement with the biblical texts and interact with each other homiletically and liturgically to enable the *leitourgia*, literally the 'work' of the worshiping congregation to take place" (italics by the author).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See "Worship as a Locus for Transformation" in *Worship That Changes Lives*, edited by Alexis D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 25-39.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Five of the seven gifts of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17) are directed towards the welfare of others.

<sup>33</sup> Mulholland, *ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> Cherry, *The Music Architect*, *ibid.*, 1-1

<sup>35</sup> Mitman, *ibid.*, 33.

*The worship leader is a servant of biblical theology.*

The biblical illiteracy in churches today calls for worship leaders, along with pastors, to serve as “spiritual dieticians” for their congregations.<sup>36</sup> A healthy spiritual diet will address poor or faulty theology, particularly in the content of the songs; and it must also seek to ensure that the singing provides a rich diet of biblical theology over the course of time. Does theology draw us into worship? Matt Smethurst argues that it can, and points to Paul’s theology. In Romans 9-11, “the deep end of the theological pool,”

Paul concludes: *Oh, the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out! . . . For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen* (Rom. 11: 33, 36).

What arrested Paul’s heart and moved him to erupt in worship? In the context of the passage, the answer is plain: doctrine. Doctrine drove him to delight. His theology exploded like fireworks into doxology.<sup>37</sup>

*The worship leader is a passionate musician.*

The worship leader serves as a discerning guide for the congregation regarding wrong notions of music. At the same time, a major portion of the worship ministry in each service will be musical, and those leading the worship are accountable to God for the musical offering of the people. In the process, musicians face the temptation again and again to attract attention to themselves by “showing off” musically. At the same time, they are called to pursue excellence and artistry, and not be content with “things as they are.” Amateur or professional, they must seek for God’s approval with each service so that when their Lord returns, they will hear his “well done, good and faithful servant.”

God appoints worship leaders to guide his people into worship that glorifies him and brings about spiritual transformation in their lives. While the calling of the worship leader carries solemn responsibilities, only the sovereign working of God can bring a vital renewal of true worship within the congregation. When all is said and done, God looks for hearts among leaders and pew members alike who long deeply to worship him in spirit and in truth, hearts in which he may kindle a flame of authentic worship.

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<sup>36</sup> Witvliet, *ibid.*, 190.

<sup>37</sup> Matt Smethurst, *Before You Open Your Bible* (Leyland, England: 10Publishing, 2019), 29-30.

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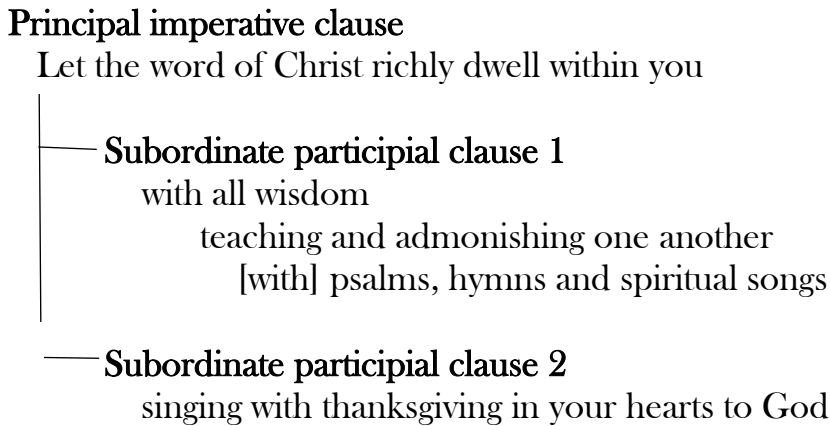
## APPENDIX 1

### Towards a Biblical Theology of Musical Leadership in Worship

Although the New Testament says relatively little concerning music in the church, Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-21 contain the most concentrated and precise instruction in scripture about the musical content of corporate worship.<sup>38</sup> The Colossians passage reads, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you; with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thanksgiving in your hearts to God (Col. 3:16 NASB).”

Colossians 3:16 contains one primary clause and two supplementary clauses, as this diagram demonstrates.

Chart 1. Grammatical Structure of Colossians 3:16<sup>39</sup>



Here Paul’s instructions are addressed to a community of worshipers, rather than simply to individual believers, as the context makes clear. A glance at verses 12 through 17 indicates that all of the relationships described are seen “within the context of the gathered people of God at worship.”<sup>40</sup> Congregational song has been an indispensable part of Christian worship since the beginning of the church, indispensable because it brings the worshiping community together in ministry both to each other and to God. The principal imperative clause reveals that in their

<sup>38</sup> David Pass calls Col. 3:16 the “Magna Carta” of church music. Cf. David B. Pass, *Music and the Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1989), 85.

<sup>39</sup> Adapted from David Detwiler, *The Role of Music in Worship According to Paul: An Exegetical Inquiry* (Talbot School of Theology at Biola University, Masters Thesis, 1997), 70.

<sup>40</sup> Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 649. Fee states that “these are not words for the individual believer, but for believers as the people of God in relation to each other.”

singing they must allow the word of Christ to “dwell richly” in them as a company of worshipers. A principal function of their singing is to plant the word in them as a community, with a view to their shared spiritual growth. Three observations about this clause have relevance here. First, “the word of Christ” may refer to “the word spoken by Christ,” but it is more likely, as David Detwiler suggests, “the teaching concerning Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Second, the present imperative form of the verb *enoikéō* ([let] dwell) stresses the ongoing nature of the obedience called for: “Let the word of Christ *continually* dwell richly in you (emphasis added).” Third, as F. F. Bruce notes, the prepositional phrase “in you” carries the force of “among you”, or “in your midst.”<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, there is something important here that concerns the congregation as a whole. The two subordinate participial phrases flow from the command to “let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.” The first of these phrases points to the fact that singing leads to the mutual edification of the worshipers (“teaching and admonishing one another”). Note the two participles “teaching” and “admonishing” as they relate to singing in worship. Here the apostle identifies two different functions of congregational song. “Teaching” points to the *kerygmatic* function of songs, as they narrate specific details of the gospel or articulate doctrinal truth, whereas “admonishing” implies exhortation, correction, or an appeal to the cultivation of godly character, behaviour, thinking, and attitudes. In this regard, Martin Hengel asserts that hymn texts have both “a teaching character” (kerygma) and also “serve the paranesis.”<sup>43</sup> *Paranesis* refers to those portions of Scripture in which the writer urges his readers to live in a certain way or to abstain from certain behaviours.<sup>44</sup>

According to the second subordinate clause, when the word richly dwells in a worshipping congregation, their singing will also be directed toward God (“singing with thanksgiving in your hearts to God”). Whereas “teaching and admonishing one another” describes a horizontal relationship, this clause describes singing that is vertical in orientation—it is directed towards God. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting perspectives raises an important issue relating to service planning. In many churches today, worship planning is based on the assumption that one part of

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<sup>41</sup> Detwiler, *ibid.*, 71.

<sup>42</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1984), 157.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Hengel, “Hymn and Christology” in *Studia Biblica 1978 III: Papers on Paul and Other New Testament Authors* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series, 3), 175.

<sup>44</sup> Malherbe defines “paranesis” as “moral exhortation in which someone is advised to pursue or abstain from something.” See Abraham J. Malherbe, “Styles of Exhortation,” in *Moral Exhortation* (Knoxville, TN: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 124.

the service (the singing) is devoted to “praise and worship,” and that another, separate, part—or parts (the sermon and perhaps the ministry to needs within the congregation)—are different, separate, aspects of the service.<sup>45</sup> This perspective, as theologian David Peterson insists, misses an essential aspect of Paul’s teaching:

The “vertical” and the “horizontal” dimensions of what takes place [in corporate worship] should not be artificially separated. One part of the meeting cannot be “the worship time” (e.g., prayer and praise) and another part “the edification time” (e.g., preaching), since Paul’s teaching encourages us to view the same activities from both points of view.<sup>46</sup>

“However much the ‘liturgy’ must be seen as a spiritual worship of God embracing the whole of life (Rom. 12:1-2), this does not alter the fact that the indwelling in and communion of Christ with the church have their point of concentration and special realization in its unity as an assembled congregation.”<sup>47</sup> The congregation, to use Best’s apt term, is in reality, “the final geography of worship.”<sup>48</sup>

In Ephesians 5:18-20, Paul gives teaching that is very similar to what we find in the Colossians 3 text. But whereas the prevailing emphasis in the Colossians passage is the *word*, Paul’s focus here is the *Spirit*.

And do not get drunk with wine, in which there is debauchery, but ***be filled with the Spirit***,<sup>19</sup> speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord;<sup>20</sup> always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to *our* God and Father;<sup>21</sup> and subject yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ (NASB).

## Chart 2. Grammatical Structure of Ephesians 5:18-20

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<sup>45</sup> Barry M. Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001). In Liesch’s description of the “free-flowing praise service,” the “music and sermon are independent” (53-66). Donald Hustad, in , *Jubilate! Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1981), 178, points to “a concept of worship held by some evangelicals” who regard “the sermon and its response [as] the only significant acts of worship.”

<sup>46</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging with God: a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 220-21.

<sup>47</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 486. Cited in Peterson, 220.

<sup>48</sup> Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books), 48.

**Principal imperative clause:**

[do not get drunk with wine. . . ]  
be filled with the Spirit

**Subordinate participial clause 1:**

speaking to one another  
in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs

**Subordinate participial clause 2:**

singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord;  
[always] giving thanks for all things in the name of the Lord Jesus

Christ

**Subordinate participial clause 3:**

subject yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ

Taking these two passages together, under the guidance of a faithful worship leader, a congregation should seek in their singing to be both centred on the word and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The singing of this congregation will minister, both in teaching and exhortation, to the other members of the congregation, using a variety of types of songs. At the same time, their songs will also be an offering of thanksgiving to God. The worshipers also will seek in worshiping together to honour God by pursuing the welfare of their fellow worshipers above their own.

## APPENDIX 2

In anticipation of writing this paper, in Fall 2022 a brief worship survey was sent out. The survey link was posted publicly on the Facebook group page, “Canadian Worship Pastors (CWP),” which has a members list of over five hundred. Various denominational groups were provided with the link as well as the alumni email list of Prairie College (Three Hills, AB). The survey did not require or allow anyone to be identified. Consequently, the results of the survey are anonymous and without demographic or denominational identification. One of the few identifiers is the size of the congregation from an election of three descriptors (under one hundred, between one hundred and two hundred ninety-nine, and over three hundred). Also queried was the “role/position” of the respondent. As of the writing of this paper, over four hundred surveys were completed.

The predominant questions centred on three areas related to worship leading - musical skill, biblical/theological knowledge; and spiritual passion. While not encompassing everything about worship leadership, these three areas cover a broad spectrum of the areas needing thought and consideration. Respondents were asked to evaluate the present capacity of their church in each of the three areas. Another question required respondents to rank the order of importance of the three areas. The final question was open ended. “What is the biggest challenge facing the worship ministry in your congregation?” The flood of answers was almost overwhelming. Those who completed the survey, perhaps due to anonymity, were free to share what was on their heart and mind. The worship experience, even in the group setting of local congregation, elicits firm expressions and reporting of perspectives and perceptions.

### WORSHIP SURVEY QUESTIONS

This brief survey is about worship leading at your church. You are being asked to consider your church’s worship leading as it is today. Do not consider what you think worship leading should be; or what worship leading could be; but worship leading as is in your congregation.

1. What is the size of your congregation? [respondents select one on the options]

- Under 100
- 100-299
- 300 or more

2. Indicate your current role/position. [respondents select one on the options or add “other”]

- Pastor
- Worship Pastor (FT or PT)
- Worship Leader (volunteer)
- Other (fill in answer)

3. What is your level of formal education? [respondents select one of the options or add “other”]

- Secondary
- Trade/Diploma
- Undergraduate (4 yr degree)
- Master
- Doctorate
- Other (fill in answer)

4. Thinking of the people who lead worship in your worship service, what is the current level of musical skill? [respondents rated on a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high)]

5. Thinking of the people who lead worship in your worship service, what is the current level of biblical/theological knowledge? [respondents rated on a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high)]

6. Thinking of the people who lead worship in your worship service, what is the current level of spiritual passion? [respondents rated on a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high)]

7. All 3 items in this list are important for worship leading and need to be considered. However, you are being asked to rank them. Without giving answer that you think we’re looking for or one that you consider to be a “right” answer, please select the list that best describes the order of importance for musical skills, biblical/theological knowledge, and spiritual passion necessary for leading worship in your congregation. [respondents select one of the options listed]

- 1. musical skill; 2. theological/biblical knowledge; 3. spiritual passion
- 1. musical skill; 2. spiritual passion; 3. theological/biblical knowledge
- 1. theological/biblical knowledge; 2. musical skill; 3. spiritual passion
- 1. theological/biblical knowledge; 2. spiritual passion; 3. musical skill
- 1. spiritual passion; 2. musical skill; 3. theological/biblical knowledge

□ 1. spiritual passion; 2. theological/biblical knowledge; 3. musical skill

8. What is the biggest challenge facing the worship ministry in your congregation?  
[fill in the blank]

### APPENDIX 3 Suggested Resource List

- Abernathy, Alexis D., ed. *Worship That Changes Lives*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Block, Daniel I. *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014.
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