

INCITING WORSHIP: HOW THE GOSPEL DRAMA FUELS OUR PRAISE

By Geoff Dresser, DWS

Every week, those leading and planning contemporary worship answer the question, “What are the songs for Sunday?” Along with picking their songs, they might consider how the worship set will flow together, interspersing scripture, prayer, and exhortation between the songs. Often these worship planners have little to no training in how to design their service. Some of these worship leaders may have the benefit of a worship service template, or perhaps some formal guidelines or unwritten expectations from their leadership as to how they might plan. Unlike their brothers and sisters in more liturgical traditions, contemporary worship leaders have great freedom in designing their part of the service. These leaders can have an enormous impact on their congregations as they lead worship sets which occupy a large portion of the weekly gathering. There is considerable potential for spiritual formation, for good or for ill. Considering this potential, how should contemporary worship leaders plan their services?

This article addresses this question, beginning with a definition of contemporary worship and then examining some current models for planning contemporary worship sets. Next, a model for worship as the telling of God’s story will be proposed. It will be argued that an act of penitence is a key element of telling God’s story in a compelling way. This act of penitence will be compared to the “inciting incident” of a story, as defined by screenwriting expert, Robert McKee.¹ This comparison will shed light on how the proper acknowledgement of sin is crucial to the drama of gospel-shaped worship. Finally, the article will discuss the interplay between a story-based model of worship and current worship planning models and propose ways that worship leaders can incorporate penitence into their worship services.

Contemporary Worship: Origins and Definition

Contemporary worship emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, shaped by two movements, the youth ministry movement and Pentecostalism.² The youth ministry movement rose out of concern that traditional forms of ministry were deemed

¹ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 181.

² Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 16-18.

irrelevant by contemporary youth, and that methods must be updated to appear relevant. Pentecostalism emphasized the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the value of physical expression in worship such as the raising of hands, as well as the value of emotional intensity in worship. Lim Swee Hong and Lester Ruth described a set of characteristics typical to contemporary worship, including contemporary language, relevance, adaptation to contemporary culture, prominence of musicians, use of modern pop music styles, uninterrupted periods of sung worship, physical expressiveness, informality, and use of modern technology such as digital projectors, lighting, and sound systems.³

Many contemporary worship services follow the revivalist style threefold order, which traces its roots back to the revival camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening.⁴ The first fold of the service consists of a longer, continuous time of sung worship (often referred to as a worship set), followed by the second fold of the service, the sermon. The third fold, which is a response to the sermon, contains a call to commitment and the final dismissal.⁵ Contemporary worship leaders are often tasked with planning the first fold of the threefold order (the worship set) and, often, they select a song as part of the response in the third fold.

This article will focus on the first fold, the worship set. It will discuss some current popular models for planning a worship set, each with its strengths and weaknesses. Next, it will make a case for a worship planning model based on the gospel narrative as a highly effective method of faithfully leading a congregation to encounter God in worship. This model includes an element of confession, which is often missing from contemporary worship services. Finally, this article will conclude with recommendations for how worship leaders may implement a gospel-narrative worship planning model in their church context.

Designing the Worship Set

Assuming that worship leaders have at their disposal a repertoire of songs that engage the congregation, and faithfully express the theology of the church, how should they choose and order these songs?⁹ One method of crafting the worship set

³ Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 2-7.

⁴ For the description and origins of the threefold order see James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship / James F. White.*, 3rd ed., rev. expanded. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 164.

⁵ The revivalist three-fold order arose from revival meetings where the primary purpose of the gathering was evangelism, rather than worship. Importing a revivalist order of worship into the Sunday morning gatherings of churches has created some ambiguity around purpose of the weekly gathering of the church. This article is concerned with the regular gatherings of a church, where the primary purpose is for believers to worship God, and evangelism would be a secondary purpose. In 1 Cor. 14:22-26, Paul describes the evangelistic effect of unbelievers witnessing authentic worship. Harold Best refers to this type of evangelistic witness as “overheard worship.” See Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 77.

is to take a journey-to-intimacy approach.⁶ Psalm 100 provides an example of this pattern. The psalm opens with a call to “[s]hout for joy,” along with other exuberant expressions of praise. It continues with a more contemplative tone in verse 3, instructing worshipers to “[k]now that the Lord is God,” and invoking the intimacy of the sheep-shepherd relationship. Verses 4-5 are a parallel description of the same pattern of worship – from joyful, outward expressions of praise to contemplative intimate worship. Psalm 95:1-7 shows a similar pattern of initial joyful praise that moves toward intimate worship. The Vineyard movement popularized the journey-to-intimacy model of worship and was instrumental in spreading this model throughout the contemporary worship movement.⁷

In practical terms, selecting songs to follow the journey to intimacy pattern of worship often means that the worship set is organized by the tempo of the songs, with faster songs at the beginning of the worship set moving toward slower tempos for the intimate worship at the end of the set. While ordering songs by tempo may be derided as a superficial approach, it is undeniable that faster tempos can evoke the joyful emotions associated with outer court worship, while slower tempos can evoke the sense of peaceful intimacy of the inner courts.⁸

The journey-to-intimacy approach to planning worship has many strengths. It is a biblical model. It evokes the worship of Israel as a journey from the outer courts to the inner courts and into the holy of holies. The journey-to-intimacy is also an effective way to engage the congregation. The up-tempo, joyful songs gather people’s attention as they enter the service. As the journey continues and the tempos get slower, the worship becomes more focused and intimate. This flow mirrors common human interaction which often begins with a joyful greeting and gradually moves toward vulnerable self-disclosure. The contemporary worship leader can rely on this model to plan worship services that invite and engage the congregation and draw them toward an intimate worship experience. However, there are potential weaknesses with this model. One weakness is the dependence on musicians who are skilled enough to flow seamlessly from one song to the next, but humble enough to avoid becoming the centre of attention. The emotional nature of this model also

⁶ Lim and Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus*, 33.

⁷ Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 1st edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 128-129.

⁸ The tempo of a song affects the listener’s emotional state. Slower tempos can produce a sense of gentle serenity in the listener which is consistent with the emotions associated with the imagery of Psalm 95:7. See Hevner, Kate. “The Affective Value of Pitch and Tempo in Music.” *The American Journal of Psychology* 49, no. 4 (1937): 621–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1416385>; Dalla Bella, Simone, Isabelle Peretz, Luc Rousseau, and Nathalie Gosselin. “A developmental study of the affective value of tempo and mode in music.” *Cognition* 80, no. 3 (2001): B1-B10.

brings with it the danger of the journey-to-intimacy experience taking on quasi-romantic undertones.⁹

Seeker-driven churches such as North Point Community Church in Atlanta, Georgia, have taken a more psychological approach to worship service planning. North Point's "Rules of Engagement" break down the service into three main sections: *Engage, Involve, Challenge*.¹⁰ For North Point, the active principle is an attendee's state of mind. The *Engage* portion of the model is designed to capture the attention of the attendees, even if they remain passive observers. North Point also borrows from the world of marketing by attempting to engage a specific target audience of 30–35-year-old males, reasoning that if they can engage them, they will also engage those outside the target audience.¹¹ Often the engagement portion of the service includes a performance of a popular secular song that would be familiar to an unchurched person. The key transition to the *Involve* stage of this model is moving the attendee from passive observer to active participant. The model stipulates that during the *Engage* portion, trust is built with the attendees, which makes them willing to become involved in the service, through sung worship. The *Challenge* portion of the model is the sermon. This worship planning model can be used in conjunction with other models of worship planning. For instance, a journey-to-intimacy worship set could easily fit into the *Engage* and *Involve* portions of North Point's threefold rules of engagement.

North Point's model is human-centered rather than God-centered. Andy Stanley states that the overarching purpose for North Point's weekend services is "life change" among the people attending the services.¹² The primary objective is to "create worship experiences that make people want to come back and take a next step."¹³ While these outcomes are certainly something that every pastor desires to see in their people, the model neglects to address God's role in the worship gathering, which can lead to the mistaken idea that the people attending the worship service are the primary audience for worship, rather than God.

Another potential worship planning paradigm is that of thematic worship. In thematic worship, every element of the worship service relates to a theme. Typically, the theme is the topic of the sermon. Thematic worship has the strength of clearly

⁹ Paul Zahl, "Contemporary Music Driven Worship: A Liturgical Response." In *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views*, ed. Paul Engle and Paul Basden (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

¹⁰ *Rules of Engagement: A Roadmap for Successful Worship Service Planning*, DVD (Alpharetta, GA: North Point Church, 2013).

¹¹ "Inside North Point: A Question and Answer session with: Julie Arnold from Service Programming" in *Rules of Engagement: A Roadmap for Successful Worship Service Planning*, DVD (Alpharetta, GA: North Point Church, 2013).

¹² Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), chap. 10, Kindle.

¹³ Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, Appendix C, Kindle.

communicating a concept or truth through effective focus and repetition throughout the entire service. A weakness is that thematic worship can end up as a variety show style of service which relates more to a concept than it relates to God.¹⁴ Another weakness is that thematic worship can lack flow by bouncing back and forth in what worship leader and author Adam Perez calls “thematic tetherball.”¹⁵ Perhaps Perez’s objections stem more from poorly executed thematic planning. Thematic worship lends itself well to topics such as God’s grace or God’s holiness. Other topics, like financial stewardship or relationships and sexuality, may pose serious challenges to the thematic worship model. Although thematic worship has some weaknesses, it can still be effective in some cases.¹⁶ It should also be noted that a worship service may combine the thematic and journey-to-intimacy models since these they are not mutually exclusive.

None of these models explicitly reflect the conversational nature of the worship encounter.¹⁷ In worship, God is an active participant in a dialogue with his people; however, the thematic and journey-to-intimacy models do not explicitly reflect this aspect of worship. Worship designed using these models can assume that God is merely the passive recipient of worship, rather than an active participant in it. In a threefold worship service, the dialogue of the worship encounter tends to be flattened to the point that the worship set is the worshipers speaking to God as He passively listens. Then, during the sermon, God speaks through the preacher to the people, who passively listen. Finally, during the response to the sermon, the worshipers again speak to God, while God passively listens. True worship should be an active conversation between God and His people.

Worship as Story

Another model for ordering worship is to consider the worship service as a story told through dialogue between God and His people. Looking to scripture for descriptions of those dialogical encounters, a clear pattern emerges. In *Worship in the Shape of Scripture*, F. Russell Mitman identifies a fivefold order of worship based upon this pattern.¹⁸ Mittman’s pattern is as follows:

¹⁴ Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 54-55.

¹⁵ Adam Perez, “Rethinking the Planning Process,” in *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship*, ed. Lester Ruth (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 41,

¹⁶ Barry Leisch presents a positive view of thematic worship. Barry Wayne Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 75-77.

¹⁷ Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 56-57.

¹⁸ F. Russell Mitman, *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 43-46.

- 1) Gathering – God initiates the worship encounter by calling his people together to worship.
- 2) Penitence – God’s people become aware of the disconnect between a holy God and their own sinful state, prompting an act of penitence.¹⁹
- 3) Word – God speaks to his people, demonstrating that the relationship has been restored.
- 4) Response – The people respond to God’s Word. This is often done through a symbolic covenant renewal act.
- 5) Sending – God sends his transformed people out to carry on his mission in the world.

Mittman illustrates this pattern with the story of Moses and the burning bush from Exodus 3. God calls Moses by presenting the spectacle of the burning bush. The penitential movement is Moses’ removal of his sandals. The word is the message that God gives to Moses. Moses’ response comes in Exodus 4 and is accompanied by powerful signs. Finally, God sends Moses back to Egypt with a mission to free God’s people.²⁰

Constance Cherry also advocates for a narrative arc to the order of worship, calling it the Gospel Order.²¹ Cherry codifies this arc in a fourfold order in which the act of penitence is included as part of the Word, but the shape of Mittman’s fivefold order is retained. Cherry also makes the important observation that the “order of service is its own proclamation of the gospel.”²² Along a similar vein, Robert E. Webber describes worship as “doing God’s Story.”²³ Webber defines worship as celebrating, remembering, re-enacting, and proclaiming God’s story. That story is the gospel. In gathered worship, the content is the story of God, both on the cosmic and the personal level.

If the order of worship is a retelling of the gospel, how well do the contemporary models of worship tell that story? The thematic model of worship does not provide any narrative structure, being organized around a theme rather than a story. The journey-to-intimacy model does provide a sense of a narrative direction in proceeding from the outer courts of praise to the inner courts of worship. North Point’s *Engage, Involve, Challenge* also contains a narrative

¹⁹ Some worship theologians such as Robert E. Webber, Cherry, and Perez simplify into a fourfold order by including penitence in the gathering fold. However, I prefer Mittman’s designation of a fivefold order in which penitence emphasized as a separate fold in the order of worship.

²⁰ For more examples see Mittman “Shaping the Event.” In *Worship in the Shape of Scripture*, 31-53.

²¹ Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 58-63.

²² Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 62.

²³ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 29.

direction. However, none of these models incorporate the Penitence fold of Mittman's fivefold order. How does this affect the story told in our worship?

What Makes Good Storytelling?

There is a great deal that Hollywood (its many faults notwithstanding) can teach us about story. After all, the Hollywood movie is perhaps the leading medium of storytelling in our current culture. One of the foremost authorities in Hollywood screenwriting is Robert McKee.²⁴ In his seminal book, *Story*, McKee writes that an essential element of story is the inciting incident. The inciting incident “radically upsets the balance of forces” within the story and puts into motion the other elements of the story.²⁵ For example, in the movie “Jaws,” the inciting incident occurs when a killer shark eats a swimmer. This event upsets the balance of life in a New England tourist town and launches the protagonist into a quest toward the climactic confrontation with the killer shark. Without the inciting incident, a story lacks direction and the motivations of the characters will be unclear. McKee writes that the “inciting incident is the story’s most profound cause.”²⁶

Applying McKee’s concept of the inciting incident to God’s story, the event that upsets the initial balance is the Fall. In the beginning, creation is completely peaceful and harmonious. When sin enters the world, this balance is upset, and the rest of God’s plan is set into motion. The inciting incident of the Fall leads to Christ’s climactic death and resurrection to defeat sin. If reality of sin and its consequences are ignored, the act of worshiping God can seem to take on a different meaning. Of course, God is eternally worthy of worship, and the arrival of sin in the world is not a precondition for worship. In Rev 4:11, God is shown to be worthy of worship for creation alone. However, in Rev 5:9, the Lamb of God is worshiped for his salvific acts. Therefore, worship is incomplete when the fullness of God’s redemption story is not included. It is not the case that McKee’s theory of story offers something new that can improve gospel-ordered worship. Rather, McKee’s concept of story and the importance of the inciting incident shows worship leaders the consequences of omitting the sin event from the enacting of God’s story in worship.

Omitting the inciting incident by neglecting penitence in worship can distort the telling of God’s story. For example, when worship leaders neglect to acknowledge God’s rescue from sin, worship can be seen as merely an emotional

²⁴ Ian Parker, “The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru,” *The New Yorker*, October 12, 2003, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/20/the-real-mckee>; Dana Goodyear, “Robert McKee Writes His Own Ending,” *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/10/24/robert-mckee-writes-his-own-ending>.

²⁵ McKee, *Story*, 190.

²⁶ McKee, *Story*, 288.

outlet for the worshiper. Worship that neglects the inciting incident could also be seen as something demanded of us by a needy God, calling to mind C. S. Lewis’s description of the mistaken idea, “that God should in any sense need, or crave for, our worship like a vain woman wanting compliments, or a vain author presenting his new books to people who never met or heard of him.”²⁷ Without the inciting incident, God’s story is incomplete. In Mitman’s fivefold order of worship, the act of penitence is a remembrance of the inciting incident of God’s story. The sin event is the source of the dramatic energy of the gospel story, and as such provides dramatic energy to a gospel-ordered worship service. If the inciting incident is removed from the celebration of the gospel, worship is distorted and weakened. The Good News is simply news.

Inciting Worship

How does a contemporary worship leader facilitate the telling of God’s story, in all its fullness, if their church follows a revivalist threefold order of worship? Fortunately, with minor modifications, a worship leader can expand the three folds of the revivalist order to include the full gospel story (See Table 1). The worship leader planning the opening worship set of the revivalist order need only include the act of penitence during that set, thus inserting the inciting incident into the service. The service of the Word, which the worship leader likely has no role in planning, needs no modification. The response to the Word in the revivalist threefold order likely needs no modification since it typically includes both a response to the Word and a sending out of the people.²⁸ Therefore, the addition of an act of penitence during the worship set is likely all that is needed to increase the drama of the worship service and to tell God’s story more faithfully.

Table 1: Comparison of Revivalist Threefold and Mitman’s Fivefold Worship Order

Revivalist threefold	Mittman’s fivefold
Worship Set	Gather
	Penitence

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 93.

²⁸ Sadly, this sending is often perfunctory. Churches would benefit from giving attention to the conclusion of their services. See Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 129-140.

Word	Word
Response	Response
	Sending

It should be mentioned that in contemporary worship services there is often a penitential element during the response to the Word when communion is received. The communion celebration is often a somber reflection on the gravity of one’s sins and may or may not include an explicit assurance of the forgiveness of sins. While this act of penitence is appropriate, it does not function as an inciting incident since it takes place near the end of the story. The inciting incident must take place near the beginning of the story to produce the desired effect.²⁹ If the inciting incident occurs too late, the body of the story lacks any dramatic impetus toward its conclusion.

When the penitential act takes place near the beginning of the service, the worshiper steps into the gospel story, enacting it in the first person as they confess their sin and receive forgiveness. This participation in the gospel story can invite a deeper engagement in the worship service. The expressions of gratitude and love that follow the forgiveness of one’s sin will be more authentic than when the confession/absolution act has been neglected. After all, “whoever is forgiven much, loves much; whoever is forgiven little, loves little.”³⁰ There may also be a penitential aspect to the response to the Word. Certainly, any right response to the Word calls for a turning away from sin and turning toward God. However, observing an initial penitential act during the opening worship set only strengthens this response. For instance, in Rom 12:1, the call to present one’s body as a living sacrifice is made “in view of God’s mercy.” This dynamic of a response to the Word in view of God’s mercy is underscored when the worshipers have experienced God’s mercy during the opening worship set.

The addition of the penitential act to the opening worship set is also compatible with the journey-to-intimacy model of worship set design. The song set can begin with up-tempo, joyful songs of declarative praise which gather the church in spirit. At a later point in the song set, the penitential act could occur, followed by more intimate songs expressing gratitude for the forgiveness and mercy of God. In

²⁹ McKee, *Story*, 200-204.

³⁰ Luke 7:47.

fact, confession of sin and receiving God’s forgiveness is crucial to drawing close to God, whereas ignoring sin inhibits intimacy with God.³¹

Practical Advice for Worship Leaders

How can the contemporary worship leader include an act of penitence in their worship set? Can this be accomplished through appropriate song selection? Are there contemporary worship songs that echo Isaiah’s cry, “Woe is me?”³² There are a few such songs, but in contemporary worship, congregations are more likely to sing “Whoa” than “Woe.” According to CCLI’s thematic classification, a survey of the CCLI top 100 songs shows that only two songs deal with the theme of confession.³³ With few exceptions, contemporary worship songs do not provide a suitable vehicle for confession.³⁴ Many songs celebrate forgiveness as having already been received, but according to McKee, it is not sufficient to treat the inciting incident as part of the back story, but rather the inciting incident must take place on screen.³⁵ Therefore, the act of penitence must be intentionally observed during the worship service to produce the desired dramatic energy.

To provide the opportunity for worshipers to engage in an act of penitence, the worship planner should move beyond merely picking songs. The worship planner should find a place within the connective tissue that holds together the songs of the worship set to include a penitential act. There are several ways of doing this, and many liturgical resources exist to help the worship leader.³⁶ Indeed, a contemporary worship leader would do well to study traditional liturgical resources such as the Book of Common Prayer for ideas that could be adapted to their own church context.

One method of observing an act of penitence is for the worship leader to lead an extemporaneous prayer of confession, followed by a song that gives thanks for the forgiveness of God. The worship leader could also lead the congregation in a written prayer of confession that could be projected onto the screens. Scriptural passages of confession, such as Psalm 51, could also be used. In each case, the worship leader can contextualize the act of penitence to their church worship style. Careful consideration should be given when introducing the concept of a penitential act of worship so as not to disorient worshipers with an abrupt change of style. The

³¹ 1 John 1:8-10.

³² Isaiah 6:5.

³³ CCLI SongSelect Database categorizes songs by theme. As of July 2023, only 2 out of the CCLI top 100 songs were designated to have the theme of confession. See <http://songselect.ccli.com>.

³⁴ Even in liturgical settings, the confession is often spoken or observed in silence rather than sung.

³⁵ McKee, *Story*, 198.

³⁶ One excellent resource, providing many examples of confession in worship is *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed, Worship Resources Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship: Baker Books, 2013).

penitential act of worship need not take a long time, but it must not be rushed. A simple prayer such as the following could be led:

Father, as we worship you in the beauty of your holiness, we recognize that we have fallen short of your glory. We confess that we are a sinful people, in need of your forgiveness. We are sorry for how we have rebelled against you. By your mercy, grant us your forgiveness. Amen.

Following the prayer, the worship leader could declare the following:

Scripture tells us that when we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive us. Let us continue to praise Him because, in Christ, our sins have been forgiven!

Following these words, the worship leader can lead a song rejoicing in God's mercy and forgiveness. Even something as simple as the preceding example enacts the inciting incident of God's story within the worship service.

It is wise for the worship leader to consider how best to introduce a penitential element to the service. First, the worship leader should consult with his or her supervisor, perhaps the lead pastor or a service programming committee, about any changes to planning the worship services. This consultation is an opportunity to gain 'buy-in' from the leadership as well as an opportunity to address proactively any concerns and questions about the change. Second, the worship leader should carefully plan and practice leading the penitential act. Introducing something new to a congregation is a delicate moment and it would be unfortunate if poor execution hindered the adoption and engagement of the congregation. Third, the change can be introduced gradually, and need not occur every week at first. In fact, the worship leader may face constraints on being able to implement it every week. However, regularly doing the act of penitence, even if it cannot be every week, is better than not doing it at all. Finally, the worship leader should experiment, evaluate, and adapt. After leading the act of penitence within a worship service, the leader should evaluate the results. Did the congregation engage? Was it well executed? Could it be improved? After thoughtful observations and consultation with leaders and congregants, the worship leader can make any changes necessary to improve the leading of the penitential act.³⁷

³⁷ A comprehensive guide to leading change in worship ministry is provided by Franklin M. Segler and Randall Bradley, "Managing and Leading Worship Change." In *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, 3rd Ed., (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 285-294.

A final caution to worship leaders: avoid overly explaining the act of penitence. Often, the impact of a change is dulled by excessive commentary. Allow the drama of the story to unfold on its own. Allow the congregation to encounter the power of the “inciting incident” in their worship. The authentic experience of confession and forgiveness needs no explanation.

Contemporary worship leaders have an array of considerations when planning their worship sets. Many of the models for contemporary worship leave out an important part of worship – the act of penitence. The act of penitence is an essential part of God’s story, acting as what Robert McKee calls the inciting incident. If worship is viewed as a celebration of God’s story, it is essential that the inciting incident of that story be included. The worship leader can include this act of penitence in a variety of ways that are compatible with other common models for worship planning. The faithful celebration of the fullness of God’s story in worship, especially including the element of confession, will enhance the drama in the worship experience of the church.

Geoff Dresser, MWS, DWS is the assistant professor of Worship Arts at Briercrest College. Before teaching at Briercrest, he was a worship pastor at churches in Ottawa, and Winnipeg, and he currently serves as the worship pastor at Victory Church in Moose Jaw. Geoff is passionate about raising up the next generation of worship leaders for the church in Canada.

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