

# **What is Worship?**

**A Primer for Worship Leaders**

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

<sup>4</sup> “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> **You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.** <sup>6</sup> **And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.** <sup>7</sup> You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. <sup>8</sup> You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. <sup>9</sup> You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Matthew 22: 36–40

<sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, “You shall **love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.** <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

John 4:23–24

<sup>23</sup> “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the **true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth**, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Romans 1:1–6

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup> and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup> through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the **obedience of faith** for the sake of his name among all the nations, <sup>6</sup> including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ...”

Romans 12: 1–2

<sup>1</sup> 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.** <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the **renewal of your mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

## An Easily Impossible Job

Worship is easy. We don't need anyone to teach us how to do it. It's hard-wired into our DNA. We're born worshipers. God made us that way.

But worshipping the right thing rightly? Impossible.

God, and God alone, is the only One who is worthy of worship. Yet, we're so easily led off-course to worship anything and everything but Him. We see this throughout the Scriptures as the people of God are easily swayed to worship false, pagan gods of the surrounding nations. We see in Exodus 32 that the people of God didn't even need the temptation of other nations to worship other gods. *Right after* God rescued the Israelites from their enslavement to Egypt, gave them victory in battles against multiple enemies, and sustained them throughout their long march through the wilderness, the Israelites demanded that Aaron, Moses' second-in-command, make gods for them; gods made in their image.

John Calvin, speaking to mankind's inability to worship God on its own, writes:

“Man's mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a god according to its own capacity; as it sluggishly plods, indeed is overwhelmed with the crassest ignorance, it conceives an unreality and an empty appearance as God.”<sup>1</sup>

Instead of imaging God in the world, we make gods in our image and slavishly serve them. It's easy for us to bow to the whims and wants of these self-made gods because they reflect our self-centered whims and wants. Worshiping ourselves is easy for us. Worshiping the Lord is monumentally difficult.

To worship God, we must know God. A lack of knowing God will lead us into the self-serving pit of idolatry. A right understanding of God leads to the right worship of God.

## A Remarkable Truth

We see this truth in John chapter 4. Here we find Jesus relaxing at Jacob's well, and a Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw some water. Jesus asks her for a drink and an excruciatingly awkward interaction about worship ensues. After it's exposed that the woman is living in an immoral relationship with her sixth man, she quickly changes the subject to the intersectionality of worship and geography, saying,

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin's Institutes, 1:108

“ ‘Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.’ ” Jesus is unfazed, and responds, “ ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews’ ” (21-22). Then Jesus says something groundbreaking to her:

“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4: 23-24)

Jesus reveals this idea of **true worship**. “True,” meaning authentic, genuine, and pure - *really real*. Un-fake. Real gold rather than fool’s gold. Jesus is talking about people who won’t just give perfunctory service to Him but will worship God with their whole life. He’s talking about those who love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and mind. These worshipers will worship the Lord in “*spirit and truth*,” meaning with sincere hearts rooted in the Word of God.

But, Jesus means more with His statement, “in spirit and truth.” He’s making a profound, revolutionary theological point. D.A. Carson, in his book “Worship by the Book,” explains that to worship God “in truth,” is “first and foremost a way of saying that we must worship God *by means of Christ*.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is saying we’re unable to worship God unless we come through Him. He is the “ ‘the truth’ ” and “ ‘no one comes to the Father except through’ ” Him (*John 14:6*).

He also shows us that we must not only come *through* Him but also have a new spirit that longs to worship God. By saying “in spirit,” Jesus is looking back to an Old Testament promise from Ezekiel 36:27, which says, “I will put my Spirit *within* you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” The predominant view in that day was that worship must be done at a particular place (like the Temple). And yet, Jesus brought in a new, promised worship that’s not *merely* external, but internal from the spirit of a person. Through faith in Christ, we are indwelled with the Holy Spirit of God (*John 14: 15-17; Acts 2: 1-4*) who gives us the ability to worship the Lord, genuinely.

So what do we learn about worship from this passage?

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, D.A. *Worship by the Book*. Zondervan, 2002.

**Worship starts and ends with God.** He and He alone is the One who gives us the ability to worship Him. It is He who calls, He who saves, He who transforms, and He who will glorify His people who will worship Him forever. It is He who gives us “the truth” of Jesus Christ and the indwelling “spirit” that transforms our desires to worship Him. Right worship is *all* about God, and it is *not* about us.

God is to be the object of all of creation’s worship (*Psalms 148; Rev 5: 11-14*). He made everything, and everything rests under His good rule (*Gen 1*). No other can claim this title. No one else is like God (*Jer 10:6*). He is holy (*Isaiah 6: 1-4*), meaning He’s “set apart” or different because He alone is *perfectly perfect* (*Psalms 145:17*). He is beyond and exalted above His creation in every way imaginable (*Isaiah 40: 25-26*). There is none like Him. He and He alone is worthy of worship.

## **An Exhaustive Task**

So, God is the initiator and goal of our worship. But, *how* does God desire His creation to worship Him? What does it mean to worship God?

**Worship is our whole-life response to God’s revelation of Himself.** It encompasses *all* of who we are: our intellect, our affection, our will, and our energy. The Word of God tells us that the pinnacle commandment the Lord has given to mankind is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (*Matt 22:37; Deut 6:5*).

There is no part of us that God does not demand we submit to His Lordship. Dutch pastor and theologian Abraham Kuyper remarked, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” Colossians 1: 15-18 agrees:

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

In Romans 12:1, Paul urges us to “present [our] bodies as a **living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God.” In the Old Testament, a sacrifice was typically an animal given over to the Lord to be *completely consumed* by fire as an act of worship, trust,

and thanksgiving. In like manner, we give everything – our whole self – to the Lord to be completely consumed for His glory. This is our “spiritual worship.” Therefore, worship permeates our whole life. It is all-encompassing. It colors the way we speak to our spouse, buy groceries, and work. It guides how we watch Netflix, vote, and play music. God owns us, so we submit all to Him.

And yet, none of us does this remotely well. When it comes to being a “living sacrifice,” we fail miserably. And, we’re damned for it. But, there’s good news.

## **A Really Good (True) Story**

The gospel is the “good news” that through Jesus Christ we can know and be fully loved by God. This is the most monumental statement in the cosmos. Because we’re by nature rebellious people who’ve betrayed God, wanting to self-rule rather than submit to God’s rule, we’re deserving of God’s wrath.

God is holy. He’s beyond us in every conceivable way. Everything He is and does is completely right and good. Who He is and what He does is the definition of “right” and “good.” We are not like this; we are *un-holy*. Because God is holy and we’re unholy, we cannot live in God’s presence else we’d rightly die. Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death.” This is what our self-rule has earned us.

But, Romans 6:23 doesn’t end with death. If it did, that wouldn’t be good news! It continues, “...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The love that God has for us goes beyond all sense and reason. It exceeds the deepest depths of the ocean and extends beyond the furthest star. It doesn’t make sense, and yet it’s true. Ephesians 2:4-6 explains God’s tremendous love for us in this way:

“<sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...”

God sent His Son, Jesus Christ into the world to perfectly obey the Law of God - to be the holy man we can’t be. And then, the incarnate God died as if He were sin incarnate (2 Cor 5:21). The punishment we *deserve* for our sin was placed on Him.

Because of this, all of God’s rage against our sin has been exhausted. Jesus took God’s wrath, we get God’s mercy. Then, confirming that He is the

Son of God, Jesus defeated death and rose from the grave. He gives new life to the believer, and we can say, with full confidence in the face of death:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory?”

O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15: 54b–55)

Through faith in Jesus alone, not through anything we have done or can do, we are called “beloved,” and God is well-pleased with us (*Matt 3:17*). Romans 4:5 tell us that “to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” Apart from faith in Christ, our worship is a putrid stench before God because it smells like self-righteousness. God despises self-righteousness, but delights in Christ-righteousness. Our acceptance before God is founded on Christ’s righteousness, not our own. In Christ, our worship is perfected, for He is our righteousness (*Eph 2: 4-7; 1 Cor 1:30–31*).

This reality is true all of the time, not just on Sunday mornings. Jesus is our righteousness before God *at all times*. Regardless of our obedience or disobedience, loyalty or disloyalty, faithfulness or unfaithfulness, Jesus alone is our righteousness. Our standing before God is based solely on Jesus and His work, not our work. Our role is to abide (or rest) in Him by trusting in Who He is and what He’s done. It’s through this abiding that we’re able to do the “good works” that “God prepared beforehand” for us to do (*Eph 2:10*).

## **Our Good Work**

One of the good works God has given to us, specifically, is to lead His people in praising Him through song. This is not the sum total of our worship, but it is a unique task God has given us in the church. When we think of this work, we must remember that it’s to be done by “living sacrifices” who have wholly given themselves over to the Lord by faith in Jesus.

## **A Dangerous Role**

But, what does it mean to be a “worship leader?” Does it mean that you’re *only* a song leader? For some churches, sure. But, here at Ashland, we’re saying more than that. If worship is a whole-life response to God’s revelation of Himself and we’re to be worship leaders, we must be *actively leading the people of God to worship Him*

*through all aspects of our life, not just on the stage.* **Leading worship is more than a Sunday gig. It's a daily devotion to the exaltation of God.** This means our life Monday through Saturday, not just on Sunday, must reflect a life devoted to the worship of God.

This is a high and dangerous calling. To call oneself a “worship leader” is to, in a sense, willingly step into the role of a hypocrite. You know yourself. You know your sin better than anyone else. You know what darkness lies beneath that worshipful exterior. If you’re honest, you know you’re not remotely qualified to be called a “worship leader.” If we lead people to what we worship most often, we’ll lead them into idolatry.

That’s why our *worship must begin with the gospel.*

You’re not in this role because you’re an exceptional singer or musician. You’re not in this role because you have solid character and a good reputation. No, you’re a worship leader because the gospel is true. You’re a worship leader because 1 Peter 2:9–10 is true:

“you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

And so this is what we do, we proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. And, we do this *through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit*. He alone is the only One who worshiped God rightly. **He is our Worship Leader.** Therefore, our *worship leadership must be saturated with the gospel*. This is what informs how we *view* and *do* our role.

Now, up to this point, we’ve spoken about worship, but very little about music. Hopefully, you understand that worship is *much more* than music. But, God has given us each the unique task of leading His people in praising Him through song, and so we move on to music and worship.

## **A Singing People**

Why is music such an integral part of our worship gatherings as a church? Is it merely cultural? Is our singing just an artifact of what the church has done since it started, so we just keep doing it? In the John 4 text referenced earlier, Jesus was



talking about worship and never once mentioned singing. So, why is it such a big deal? Because God wants us to. Singing to the Lord is biblical.

## Why Do We Sing?

God wants His people to sing to Him, one another, and the world. Throughout the Scriptures, the people of God are compelled and commanded to sing:

### **Psalm 149:1**

“Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly!”

### **Exodus 15:1-2**

“Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

[2] The LORD is my strength and my song,

and he has become my salvation;

this is my God, and I will praise him,

my father’s God, and I will exalt him. (Exodus 15:1–2)

### **Ephesians 5:18b–19**

“...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart...”

Singing is *hardwired* into creation’s design. All of creation sings the praises of God:

### **Psalm 98**

<sup>1</sup> Oh sing to the LORD a new song,

for he has done marvelous things!

His right hand and his holy arm

have worked salvation for him.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD has made known his salvation;

he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

<sup>3</sup> He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness

to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen  
the salvation of our God.

<sup>4</sup> Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

<sup>5</sup> Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
with the lyre and the sound of melody!

<sup>6</sup> With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

<sup>7</sup> Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who dwell in it!

<sup>8</sup> Let the rivers clap their hands;  
let the hills sing for joy together

<sup>9</sup> before the LORD, for he comes  
to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.

We join in with creation's song to exalt the name of Jesus. We are designed to sing, commanded to sing, and compelled to sing because of the gospel.

Singing allows us to passionately praise the Living God. It's a meeting ground where our heart, body, and mind are all working together to exalt the name of Jesus. It's a practical outflow of the command we're given to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

When something is praiseworthy, we praise it. When someone's favorite football team wins the Super Bowl, you don't have to command them to tell you all the great things about the program. They're going to tell you about it. You'll probably have to tell them to *stop* talking about it at some point. We delight in praising what is praiseworthy. Our joy of the praiseworthy thing is completed by our praise of that thing. C.S. Lewis wrote that "we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are, the delight is incomplete till it is expressed."

God is the most praiseworthy being. He lovingly gives Himself to us to complete our satisfaction and joy. We praise what we enjoy—our joy is incomplete

without praise—and so, our enjoyment of God *must* result in His praise for it to be complete. Praise is the completion of joy. And it's the gospel—the reality of sinners reconciled to God—that compels our praise. Singing is a manifestation of our joy. It's a way for us to express our joy. It's a way for us to delight in God and what He's done for us.

The key text we use to explain why we sing is Colossians 3:16, which tells us to *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”* **The ultimate purpose of our song is to delight in and proclaim the gospel of God.**

### **What Do We Sing?**

We sing the gospel. Gospel singing implants the gospel into us. We're to let the words of Christ live and make their home in us. “Words of Christ” means His teaching, but also means the “word about Christ,” meaning *all of Scripture because all of Scripture is about Christ* ([Luke 24:27](#)). So, we sing gospel songs. We sing songs that remind us of who God is and what He's done for us. We sing songs that remind us who we are and what we've been charged to do. We sing the Word of God.

### **To Whom Do We Sing?**

Primarily, we sing to the Lord. He is the object of our worship. We extol His name to Him. We join Him in His exaltation of Himself. This is the vertical aspect of our singing. But, gospel singing doesn't just implant the gospel into us *individually*, but *collectively*. God did not save a *person*, but a *people*. We sing the gospel *with* and *to* one another, “teaching and admonishing one another.” Our worship doesn't only have the vertical target of praising God, but a horizontal target of encouraging, teaching, and correcting one another. There's an inherent one-anotherness to our singing that's unavoidable. As we sing together, we're encouraged by the choir of voices around us reminding us of the truth of God's Word, spurring us on towards love and good works ([Heb 10:24](#)).

Shockingly, we also sing with Christ. Hebrews 2: 10-12 tells us that Jesus sings along with us:

“For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, “I will tell of your name to my

brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

When we sing gospel songs with God’s people, our Elder Brother Jesus joins us, leading us, and showing us the Father and His love for us!

## How Do We Sing?

We sing with “thankfulness in [our] hearts to God.” Singing gospel songs is the marriage of the Word of God with intense emotion. It allows us to marry the truth of God and our affection for Him in a powerful way. It allows us to cry out to Him, honestly in our anger, pain, and distress, and still be reminded that “great is Thy faithfulness.” We sing with thankfulness to Him because we have much to be thankful for:

“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” (Colossians 1:21)

As we sing the gospel of God with the people of God, and as our affections are stirred towards Him, we’re compelled to go and tell the world. **This is the ultimate purpose of our song: to proclaim the gospel of God for the glory of God.** This is our mission, to make disciples of Jesus Christ. This leads us to how we flesh out our particular role in this mission.

## The Worship Leader

There's a lot to say about the specifics regarding the role of a worship leader, but for now, I want to give a definition of the role. I'm taking this definition directly from the book "Worship Matters" by Bob Kauflin, Director of Sovereign Grace Music:

A faithful worship leader...

*magnifies the greatness of God in Jesus Christ  
through the power of the Holy Spirit  
by skillfully combining God's Word with music,  
thereby motivating the gathered church  
to proclaim the gospel,  
to cherish God's presence,  
and to live for God's glory.*

This is the primary definition we'll use to influence how we lead, make decisions, and develop people as we progress as a ministry team together.