

THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF A WORSHIP LEADER

By Paul Israelson

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Summary:

This paper identifies the necessary spiritual qualifications to be an effective worship leader and then offers advice on how to give leadership to the spiritual formation of these leaders. Included are warnings about the potential dangers unique to the kinds of people who choose to be worship leaders as well as the context and environment itself.

Length: 53 pages

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“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11)¹ ~ The Apostle Paul

A few years ago I heard a song called “Daniel” performed by Christian music group FFH. In the song, the singers tell us that when they need to feel God’s presence, or they need help, or that they want to give up, they are “reminded of the ones that were here before”—namely the heroes of the faith throughout the Bible. The chorus then goes,

I want to be like Daniel in the lion's den
Waiting for God's love to save him.
I wanna be, I wanna be.
I want to be like Moses when he raised his hands
And all the winds and seas obeyed him.
I wanna be, I wanna be.²

I must admit at this time that I have never wanted to be Daniel in that lion’s den! It may have been fun to be Moses at that instant, but there were other experiences in Moses’ life that definitely weren’t that appealing. Many talk of what life would be like as Paul, Samuel, or perhaps Elijah, doing great things for God and seeing His power working so mightily through us, but no one envies the formational processes and life experiences God used to shape and change them! In fact, we as worship leaders hold in high regard the concept of having a “heart like David” but do we really know what God took David through to gain that heart? Are we willing to allow God to form such a heart in us?

I admire the words of Paul when he says that he doesn’t just want to know Christ in the good and fun times, but also in the pain; knowing Him in His death and resurrection. Paul was not satisfied with a superficial knowledge of God, but was willing to go through the process of being formed daily to be more like Him. While I do not fully understand what such a calling

¹ All Scriptures quoted in the NIV unless otherwise stated.

² Michael Boggs, “Daniel” © 2000 New Spring Publishing, Inc. (div. of Brentwood-Benson Music Pub., Inc.)/ASCAP. All Rights Reserved.

means to my life, I am challenged by those words to know God deeper—not simply reveling in the thought of having a “heart like David,” but allowing God to develop one in me.

What’s a Worship Leader to Be?

Many people talk of the importance or virtue of having a heart like David, namely being a man/woman after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22), but not many really address the process by how that heart was formed. Gene Edwards paints a picture of David’s heart being formed amidst the solitude of being a lonely shepherd, the youngest of eight sons.

On those pastoral jaunts, this youngest son always carried two things: a sling and a small, guitar-like instrument. Spare time for a shepherd is abundant on rich mountain plateaus where sheep graze for days in one sequestered meadow. But as time passed and days became weeks, the young man became very lonely. The feeling of friendlessness that always roamed around inside him was magnified. He often cried. He also played his harp a great deal. He had a good voice, so he often sang. When these activities failed to solace him, he gathered up a pile of stones and, one by one, swung them at a distant tree with something akin to fury.

When one rockpile was dissipated, he would walk to the blistered tree, reassemble his rocks and designate yet another leafy enemy at yet a farther distance. He engaged in many such solitary battles.

This slingsman-singer-shepherd also loved his Lord. At night, when all the sheep lay sleeping, and he sat staring at the dying fire, he would strum upon his harp and break into a concert of one. He sang the ancient hymns of his forefathers' faith. While he sang, he wept, and while weeping he often broke forth in abandoned praise until mountains in distant places picked up his praise and tears and passed them on to higher mountains still, from whence they eventually were cast up to the ears of God.³

It is obvious that God saw something in David that pleased Him, and this *something* was of a heart nature and not due to outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7-13). John Bevere asks,

Why was God chasing David rather than his older brothers or the other men of Israel? The answer is found in [Isaiah 66:2].⁴ He favors and is after those who are humble, contrite in spirit, and tremble at His Word. The contrite in spirit are those who are quick to repent in their commitment to be submitted to divine authority.⁵

³ Gene Edwards, *A Tale of Three Kings: A Study in Brokenness* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992), 1-2.

⁴ Isaiah 66:2: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”

⁵ John Bevere, *Drawing Near: A Life of Intimacy With God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 135.

Through time, struggle, hardship, and pain God continued the process of brokenness in David's life before fulfilling the promise of becoming king. It was during this period of David's life that he often experienced God's grace, strength, protection, encouragement, and provision. The psalms he wrote attest to the fact that David did not know God's ways on a surface level, but that he had experienced God's workings deeply in his life and had seen God sustain him. It was because of these experiences that David encourages us in Psalm 34:8 to, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him."

One of my college professors, Dr. Peter Engle, used to say that one cannot lead where they have not been. David's life of worship was rooted in his experience of God and because of those experiences he was able to lead the people of Israel into a greater understanding of who God is. In the same way, we as worship leaders must come to know God intimately if we are to lead other people into experiences of deep, meaningful worship where they too can come to a greater understanding of God's presence in their lives. Again, we can't lead people into this experience with God unless we go there ourselves.⁶

To be in worship leadership will necessitate God working his character into our hearts. We see this principle of character development in the heroes of the faith that have gone before us—namely that those God has called to leadership of His people minister out of the deep working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. How we react to those workings and the experiences of life will determine the formation of our character and our fruitfulness in life and ministry.

We live from our heart. The part of us that drives and organizes our life is not just the physical. This remains true even if we deny it. You have a spirit within you and it has been formed. It takes on a specific character. . . The human spirit is an inescapable, fundamental aspect of every human being; and it takes on whichever character it has from

⁶ Andy Park, *To Know You More: Cultivating the Heart of a Worship Leader* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 69.

the experiences and the choices that we have lived through or made in our past. That is what it means for it to be “formed.”⁷

In so much that we are “formed,” God continues to “transform” us to be more like His Son, Jesus—but we must surrender our lives to His transformation. As Paul says,

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2).

No doubt David was imperfect, for he had on a few occasions performed some very serious offenses (especially after becoming king), but he was willing to own up to his shortcomings and depend on God's grace. David valued God's presence above all and was known for integrity, obedience, passionate worship, his desire to play with skill, and humility before God—all of which is needed in the heart of a worship leader.

There is a fundamental prerequisite for everyone who would worship God or lead others to do so. David abundantly manifests that quintessential trait of a heart filled with a passion for God:

My soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. So I have looked for you in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory (Ps. 63:1,2).

David reveals a largeness of heart which not only desires God's working in his own life but longs for His manifest glory “in the sanctuary.” The deep cry of such a leader's soul for both his own need *and* that of his people will never go unrewarded.⁸

We see through the examples in David's life, as well as in the teachings of Jesus, that God desires worship that is both passionate in spirit as well as worship that is founded on principles of truth. Skill and art alone do not impress God nor does passion with no boundaries, so we come before God not on our terms or with our methodologies, but in accordance with God's regulations and desires. Remember the words of the Lord to Isaiah, “These people come

⁷ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002), 13.

⁸ Jack Hayford, *Worship His Majesty* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2000), 133.

near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men” (Is. 29:13). Our worship is not to be given to God in accordance to the expectations of man, but out of the simplicity of the heart in the fear of the Lord. An example of this is seen in 1 Chronicles 13 where we find David planning the return of the Ark of the Covenant. No doubt great care was taken to plan this special service with the construction of a new cart, songs, dancers, and festive celebration, but disaster struck when Uzzah died having touched the ark in an effort to stabilize it. David was afraid of God that day and no doubt puzzled over what had gone wrong when all he desired was to bring God’s presence to His people in the City of David, but he had failed to come before God according to God’s regulations. Later, David rectified his mistake by consecrating the priests and carrying the ark properly, yet he was still as passionate (if not more) and humble as revealed in his dancing before the ark. His wife despised him for exceeding her image of kingly dignity, but David sought God’s heart in passion within God’s boundaries. In the same way, we as worship leaders must be careful that we are balanced in our approach of God, being both passionate and reverent, dedicated to honoring the presence of the Lord and not the pleasures of man. Don Pickerill states it like this:

Look at David building the cart. Can we see ourselves in our dedicated diligence at church work? How many times I’ve labored on the supposition that God’s presence can be brought in on a “new cart”—a new program of some kind. Do you know what carts are made of? *Boards and big wheels!* Have you ever tried it like I have? If we can just get enough “boards” (teams of people working on the project) and big wheels (a celebrity or successful person here or there), then we can really get things going for God! Oh, how pitiful, Church. Boards and big wheels won’t make it. God’s presence travels on the shoulders of His priests—that is, on the praises of *all* His people, for *we* are the contemporary “priests of God.” He doesn’t need our new carts. He simply wants our priestly praise.⁹

Thomas Long adds,

⁹ Don Pickerill, quoted in Jack Hayford, *Worship His Majesty*, 136.

We worshipers are often oblivious to the fact that we have come close to the edge of a great abyss. “We seek your presence, O God,” we pray with hardly a thought of what we are saying, forgetting that the One whose presence we so casually invoke summons the creation out of nothing, commands the moon and stars to sing, shatters kingdoms and brings tyrants to their knees, shakes the foundations of the world, and causes the earth to melt with a single word. “Come no closer!” God told Moses. “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exod. 3:5), but we waltz into the sanctuary, babbling of golf and groceries, mindless of place. “Ushers,” writes Dillard, “Should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence.”¹⁰

Worship leaders need to understand the fear of the Lord in respect to worship, for the fear of the Lord will necessitate that we live godly lives in respect to both attitude and action.

Worship leadership is a high calling with higher demands than many Christians realize. We have been guilty of assuming at times that an artist is qualified to lead worship because of their skill, but in the end it is God that qualifies the artist. Malachi 3:2-4 states,

²But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

And Psalm 24:3-4 adds,

³ Who may ascend the hill of the LORD ?
Who may stand in his holy place?
⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.

Just as God called the Israelites to purity regarding ministry in His presence, we likewise are called to new levels of holiness in Christ Jesus. Artistry, skill, programs, and good works are not sufficient to endear the presence of God; we need to have an authenticity of heart, but at the same rate we cannot ignore the scriptural commandments and examples for how people are to express themselves to God. The worship leader is responsible before God and the people to

¹⁰ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2001), vii; who also quoted Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 58.

worship God in both spirit and truth by serving with the gifts and wisdom given from the Lord as well as in sincerity, integrity and obedience. “In Christ there is such a thing as a transformed, well-adjusted, Spirit-filled artist. Imagine what God could do with an artistic temperament that’s completely yielded to Him.”¹¹ What is a worship leader to be? Ever more like Christ as we are increasingly changed to be more like Him.

The Pitfalls of Worship Ministry

Those that have been in ministry know all too well the struggles, pressures and attacks that can rise up from both within and without. Spiritual warfare, interpersonal conflicts, the balance in life and ministry, and personal expectations are all very real concerns for the worship leader. No doubt there are more potential pitfalls than one can reasonably state here, therefore this paper will focus primarily on four major struggles that I have experienced in my ministry.

1. Contentment and Complacency: The Challenge of Personal Growth¹²

While one cannot be a worship leader by skill alone, it is recognized that our gifts and abilities for leadership and the arts are gifts from God that should be honed and developed. Unfortunately, life and ministry do not easily afford us the opportunities or time to continue in personal skill development and so in many ways it becomes easier to coast along at our current skill level rather than condition ourselves to actively work at becoming more than we currently are. Psalm 33:3 tells us to “Sing to him a new song; *play skillfully*, and shout for joy,” and in 1 Chronicles 25:7 we see David appointing skilled vocalists to sing before the Lord. We need to continue developing our skills for several reasons:

¹¹ Rory Noland, *The Heart of the Artist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 16.

¹² This pitfall addresses the attitude of contentment that we can carry into the physical realities of our ministry. Subsequent points will address the dangers of spiritual apathy in the worship leader, but I felt it was important to note that the spiritual formation of a worship leader can be hindered by a lack of concern for quality and excellence.

God is honored when we use and develop what He has given us. Remember the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. The master gave to each servant according to his ability and expected that they would use and develop what they had been given. The servant with five talents worked hard to gain five more, the one with two talents produced two more, yet the servant with one talent did not invest time or energy into what he had been given but buried it. It is interesting to note that the master did not require perfection or a predetermined level of accomplishment, but was only concerned that his servants were faithful to use and develop what they had. The servant that did nothing with his talent was severely chastised for his disobedience; he was lulled into the pitfall of contentment and complacency.

So, what does the Master require from those in worship leadership? Faithfulness and obedience to use the gifts of leadership and artistry He has given us to minister before Him and to His people, and continued growth and maturity in developing those gifts. Ron Kenoly tells us that our continued growth “is a maturing process that through our efforts of education, training, practice and all the things we do” we can “be the best we can be.”¹³ But what is “best?” Our culture tends to glorify those that “sacrifice everything” (like our time, our friends, our families, etc.) to be the “best they can be,” but is that what God desires of us? Does God want skilled musicians who neglect Godly living? Is He pleased with earnest study and education at the neglect of relationships or proper stewardship of one’s assets? Certainly not! As Ralph Waldo Emerson has said “Talent is commonly developed at the expense of character.”¹⁴ We need a holistic viewpoint of “best”—namely, that “best” must be evaluated within the context of one’s entire being. Again, in the parable of the talents, the master gave to each according to his ability,

¹³ Ron Kenoly and Dick Bernal, *Lifting Him Up* (Orlando, FL: Creation house, 1995), 60.

¹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Scholar,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson - Volume X - Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (1884), 2005 [document on-line]; available from http://www.rwe.org/comm/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=61&Itemid=239; Internet; accessed 8 Sep. 2005.

knowing what his servants could reasonably handle. We need to trust that God has given us our gifts and abilities to fulfill the calling He has for us, and He does not want us to shrink back from this potential. This is the concern regarding contentment and complacency, and one that Kenoly raises in respect to giving God our “best.” He sees maturity and growth, whether spiritually or skillfully, as becoming more Christ-like as we strive to allow God to stretch us and deepen our abilities.¹⁵ But skill development requires work, discipline, and discernment (“work” because it takes time and effort, “discipline” because we have to be committed to personal growth, and “discernment” that we maintain a healthy balance in our lives).

God wants our heart in worship, but we should not be half-hearted when it comes to skill development. As Rory Noland states, “Being lazy with our talent is more a sign of being comfortable than being committed.”¹⁶ Let us not give in to contentment and complacency when it comes to giving God glory through our leadership and artistic abilities but let us continue toward holistic growth.

2. Fumes and Day-Old Manna: Ministering Out of Yesterday’s Revelation

See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland.
~ Isaiah 43:19

We minister out of our experiences with God—we know joy from experiencing His salvation, peace from experiencing His forgiveness, and comfort from His healing. The pitfall, however, is when we “camp out” on a particular experience rather than continue journeying with the Lord. An example of this is seen with the Apostle Peter. Peter had an incredible experience witnessing Jesus’ transfiguration in Matthew 17. It was so powerful, in fact, that all he could

¹⁵ Kenoly and Bernal, *Lifting Him Up*, 59-60.

¹⁶ Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 134.

think of was remaining at that spot and, in essence, enshrining it; but Jesus led them back into the valley (v.9). So, the question for the worship leader is: Are we moving on with the Lord into new depths and experiences or have we camped out on a past revelation? And as we move into the new things of the Lord, how do we appropriately acknowledge and “remember” God’s amazing work in his church throughout history?

Galatians 5:25 encourages us to “keep in step with the Spirit,” and so we must acknowledge that the Spirit of God is not static but dynamic in nature. Being led by God is a journey into new things and deeper understandings. We go where the Spirit goes and thus as worship leaders we must learn to obey the Spirit’s leading in our lives and ministries. However, we are not just to be *led* by the Spirit, but also *filled and empowered*. Ephesians 5:18 tells us to “be filled with the Spirit;” in fact, the implication here is that one must continue *being filled* with the Spirit.¹⁷ As ministers of worship, we need the refreshing power of the Spirit in our lives on a daily level to be truly effective in accomplishing what the Lord has called us to. As Andy Park states it, “We worship in and by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ But what happens when we neglect to seek the Lord for freshness and direction? No doubt we would grow stagnant and empty in our faith and ministry. The reasons for stagnation are many: relying on skill and ability to sustain you in ministry (failing to maintain the holistic balance in our lives), looking to past revelations for one’s current spiritual vibrancy, or just simply getting too busy to seek the Lord for the fresh oil of His Spirit.

For a variety of reasons, leaders resist giving themselves to being formed within a spirituality of Christian leadership and ministry. Some are afraid; others see no need. Yet others are preoccupied with giving themselves to the work of the church, the ministry

¹⁷ Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds. *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: The Moody Bible Institute, 1962), 747.

¹⁸ Park, *To Know You More*, 139.

being their only thought, their only care. Active leaders are needed in the church, but not to the exclusion of intimacy with God.¹⁹

If we are no longer taking the time for spiritual intimacy with God and being refilled, we become empty and will inevitably run on the fumes of the Spirit—much less than what God has for us!

The Lord gives repeated reminders of our need for His daily provision throughout Scripture. When traversing the wilderness, the Israelites' daily provision came down in the form of “manna”—bread from heaven. In Exodus 16 we see the Lord giving the Israelites the promise of provision with the stipulation that they were to take all they needed and keep none until morning (v.19). Their provision was to be day-to-day by faith; using everything they took and being given fresh manna the next morning. Yet there were those who would not listen and kept some stored away for the next day only to find their day-old manna full of maggots. This was a physical analogy of what their, and subsequently our, spiritual refreshment should be—new every day by faith! John Bevere writes:

Never forget, manna never satisfied the children of Israel. God gave them manna in the wilderness to practically show their desperate need for something more—His presence. Moses said,

You shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart . . . So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna . . . that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that *proceeds* from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8:2-3, *author's emphasis*)

Examine carefully the word *proceeds*. He did not say *proceeded*, but *proceeds*; this is present tense not past.²⁰

I do not want to give the impression that our past experiences have no value! Notice in Deuteronomy 8 that Moses is speaking to the people *about* their past experiences. They were led in the desert, they hungered, they were tested—all difficult experiences—but he also tells us that

¹⁹ Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving the People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 40.

²⁰ Bevere, *Drawing Near*, 49.

God provided for His people. God took them through a valuable experience that Moses reminds them of so that they would grow in their faith that their provision is from the Lord, but that provision is new and fresh! The same holds true for us as worship leaders. We may have gone through difficult and dry times in our Christian walk and ministries, or perhaps that is where we currently are, but we carry those experiences of God with us as we journey into new revelations of God's presence (revelations that often come in those dry times); being *continually* filled by the Spirit of God and satisfied with the bread that *proceeds* from the mouth of the Lord.

Remember that when Elijah was sitting under the broom tree in the wilderness, he wanted to die. To save his life, he was running from the murderous Jezebel, and yet under the broom tree he prayed to die. . . The angel of the Lord appeared, twice offering him bread and water, and from it he received the strength to journey to Horeb, the mount of God. Through his cry for help and the response of the messenger of God, Elijah received the necessary energy to set out on the path to Horeb. Finding strength for the journey into the wilderness began with his thirst for God.²¹

Elijah did not remain on Mt. Carmel after God revealed Himself so dramatically, rather, he experienced an intense wilderness experience which led him to find the still, small voice of God at Horeb. No matter where the Spirit of God leads us, let us endeavor to continue thirsting and hungering for the new revelations of God.

3. Sowing and Reaping: Keeping Your Heart Holy

³³“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. ³⁵The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil” (Matthew 12:34b, NAS).

How often do we stop to examine our hearts? How often do we critique the things that influence us, whether positively or negatively? In many ways we know, at least on a cognitive level, what we should and shouldn't do. We know that there are things we shouldn't read,

²¹ Ben Campbell Johnson and Andrew Dreitzer, *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), 120.

shouldn't see, shouldn't touch, shouldn't listen to, etc., but do our actions follow the Word of the Lord or do we justify ourselves and open ourselves up to unholy influences? In ministry it is really easy to put on a "Sunday face," speak all the right words, and give everyone the impression of a holy life while at the same time be harboring secret sins and desires. We clean the outside of the cup very well, but we cannot hide what is inside from God. James pulls no punches when he says,

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? (James 4:1-5)

The worship leader is not immune to the desires and influences of this world. In fact, not a day passes that our hearts are not tested in some way. We may face grief, slander, criticism, hatred, unforgiveness, mocking, and mistrust. . . and that's all on a good day!²² Still, as worship leaders, we are called to live holy lives. To do so we must realize that there is a battle against our souls that seeks to derail us from Godly living. This calling commands us to put to death the misdeeds of the body and sow righteousness into our hearts, being motivated not to serve ourselves but to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. In so much that holy living requires "death to self," Dallas Willard states, "Christian spiritual formation rests on this indispensable foundation of death to self and cannot proceed except insofar as that foundation is being laid and sustained."²³ If we want to be fruitful in this ministry of worship, we cannot be slaves to our flesh, but we must rather deny ourselves *daily* and fill our lives with pure influences

²² Falson, *Planted By The Water: The Making of a Worship Leader* (San Marino, CA: The Orchard, 1998), 37.

²³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 64.

so that we can better reflect Christ and the calling that He has placed on our lives. Let us not be found compromising our lives and ministries with the pitfall of complacent spirituality and unholy living.

4. *The Praise of Man: Battles in Pride*

The ministry of worship touches people's lives by engaging their spirits as well as emotions. Because of the intimate nature of worship, people are often very appreciative to the leader for their sensitivity in leading them to experience God's presence. The pitfall here is in measuring the success of the ministry (and ultimately your leadership) by the number of positive comments received or by the level of congregational participation and expression. John Wimber used to say that tough times are not the greatest test for a leader—the times of exaltation and success are. The big question is, "What are you going to do when everything is going right?"²⁴ As Proverbs 27:21 states, "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives."

Again, we can recognize the danger of pride on the cognitive level, but it is all too often prevalent in our lives. Dallas Willard takes it so far as to say that the radical evil of the heart can only be transformed by God *ruining* us and then changing us.²⁵ In essence, pride is rooted out when we come to the end of ourselves and find who we are in Christ. "Spiritual formation in Christ is the process by which one is moved from self-worship to Christ-centered self-denial as a general condition of life in God's present and eternal kingdom."²⁶

King David was a ruined man (many times over)! He had his battles within but he also understood who God was and who he was before God. But this understanding was birthed in pain. This is the path to brokenness: losing ourselves and being found in Christ. There is a story

²⁴ Park, *To Know You More*, 23.

²⁵ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

of a young minister who was greatly discouraged over a difficult ministry experience, yet his mentor was grateful the young man had faced what he did. When asked why the mentor said,

If you hadn't had this experience, you might have settled for being a handsome, successful, get-it-done sort of minister. You might have settled for managing the church, manipulating leaders, and selling religion to new prospects. You can never trust in these substitutes for authentic ministry. You have been driven so hard against the wall of your faith that you must decide if you believe in God, what you believe about God, and how you will relate to God. You can never be flippant, hail-fellow-well-met, seeking the approval of the masses. You now know the goals you were pursuing are too low for a man sent by God. My dear friend, don't you see in this calamity, this pain and disillusionment, the evident invitation of God?²⁷

The struggles of this world, the opposition, pain and rejection all serve to break us from our self-centered existence as we find our only hope in God. Praise from man can be of great encouragement, but the truly broken individual will be quick to recognize God at work and our position in service to Him.

Let us not be content to settle for mediocre skill or spirituality, let us remain pure of heart and in action so as to bring glory to God, and let us walk humbly before Him knowing this is His work we are privileged to be a part of. Let us "encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of [us] may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Heb. 3:13).

Following the Leader: Walking After God

"At the heart of worship ministry is a heart close to God." ~ Maxie Dunnam²⁸

"Come, follow me" were the words Jesus spoke to the gruff looking fisherman on the shores of Galilee. That was all the invitation they needed, for as Matthew 4:18-22 accounts, they immediately left their nets and followed Him. But "follow me" where? So far as is recorded, Jesus never said and they never asked, they just got off their boats, left their fishing nets, and followed the One who called them. They weren't given a road map of their coming adventures,

²⁷ Johnson and Dreitcer, *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders*, 8-9.

²⁸ Marshall Shelly, ed., *Deepening Your Ministry Through Prayer and Personal Growth* (Nashville, TN: Moorings, 1996), 39.

they didn't go for coffee and talk about how they could manage breaking away from their business, they just simply followed. We as leaders may wonder at times what it would have been like to have been on the beach that day hearing Jesus call us to follow, but would we have had the same faith to act as the early disciples did? We would certainly like to think that we would so easily lay everything aside to follow Christ, but the call is costly, requiring the surrender of our will and plans, being willing to be changed, giving up control—all to be formed into the image of the one we have chosen to follow. As Henri Nouwen states,

. . . the servant-leader is the leader who is being led to unknown, undesirable, and painful places. The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross. . . It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest.²⁹

Following Christ is costly, but necessary for the worship leader, for we cannot lead others into His presence unless we are first being led by the Spirit of God. But what does being a follower in respect to worship ministry mean for us?

1. The Leader as a Follower: Being led by the Spirit

We cannot know the deep things of God or experience the intimacy of His presence except that God reveals Himself to us and subsequently how we are to approach Him. We see this principle all throughout Scripture:

- Moses being given instructions throughout the Pentateuch on how the people were to approach and worship God;
- David crying out, “Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths,” knowing He needed to be led by God (Psalm 25:4-5);
- Jesus telling us that that true worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24);
- Paul telling us in 1 Corinthians 2 that it is the Spirit that searches the deep things of God and that it is by the Spirit that we come to know and understand God and His desires;
- Philippians 3:3 tells us that we worship by the Spirit of God.

²⁹ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: Crossroad Pub., 1989), 62-63.

Scripture continually reminds us that God has set certain parameters and expectations for both how we live and how we approach Him. These two concepts of “lifestyle worship” and specific “time and space” for worship go hand in hand for we are to be led by the Spirit in all things—both in how we live and how we approach the Almighty.

In so much that we have the Spirit of God to lead us, what does being led by the Spirit look like for the worship leader? First, *the worship leader must be a worshipper*. As Andy Park experienced, “For me, learning to lead worship was a natural byproduct of learning to worship. The most effective trait of a worship leader is a deep love for God and a willingness to express it.”³⁰ This will be discussed in more detail later, but suffice to say we lead others to the places we have been led by the Spirit. Secondly, *spiritual discernment is of utmost importance in worship ministry* for we need discernment in determining what direction the Lord is leading us in worship. As we prayerfully plan each worship service, we need to remain sensitive to the Spirit so as to work with Him in accomplishing His will in the lives of those we are serving. This requires wisdom in selecting music, Scripture passages, traditional rites, etc. as well as remaining sensitive to the moment and the things that happen throughout the service. Bob Sorge notes that sometimes a service can change direction like a river:

You could be in a time of intimacy when suddenly a spirit of celebration will erupt. Or you may be exalting the majesty of God when the river will take a sudden turn and spur you into an expression of spiritual warfare. Those who have not learned to respond to the Spirit’s fluid movements will be deprived of the thrill of moving with God, at least to the degree their soul’s desire.³¹

While I do not want to detract from the value of prayerfully planned worship services, we do need to remain open to the “nudging” of the Spirit. An example of this may be that you sense God wanting you to remain silent in His presence though you still have several songs left in your

³⁰ Park, *To Know You More*, 18.

³¹ Bob Sorge, *Following the River* (Greenwood, MO: Oasis House, 2004), 17.

schedule unsung. While you are prepared to continue, you remain sensitive to wait upon the Lord. As Barry Liesch puts it, “Leading worship requires both practical skills *and* spiritual perception.”³² However, this spiritual discernment can only be developed through times of intimate moments with the Lord through such disciplines as prayer, study, and quiet meditation as well as our experiences in leading and worshipping. Elijah found himself waiting on the Lord to meet with Him in 1 Kings 19 and knew the Lord was not in the earthquake, the wind or the fire, but in the gentle whisper. In the same way, God does not yell to get our attention, so we must learn to listen for His voice and His leading. “In order to effectively follow Jesus in public ministry, we must also follow Jesus in the lonely desert and mountains to be alone with God.”³³

Thirdly, *being led by the Spirit means giving over our plans and control to God*. This is His ministry and we are partners with Him in it. When we become possessive and defensive over ministry we really must reevaluate our motivations for being involved in it. This concept of surrender must occur both on the large scale level (such as acknowledging that we cannot “grow” our worship ministry into a large-scale, multi-team, long-lasting ministry without God’s leading) as well as in the smaller things (like planning and picking the music for each week). There are times when my senior pastor will ask me to sing a different song than I had planned, and while it disrupts my plan, I choose to submit and serve. Or, perhaps I have been teaching a few too many new songs and have been neglecting some of the more traditional hymns or choruses, can I lay aside my personal interests to honor other generations in our congregation? This may even mean surrendering your planned service strategy to God. I remember one time when I was leading the song “Worthy, You Are Worthy” (Don Moen) and was planning to key up on the third verse, but I felt God saying He wanted me to stop playing and just sing a

³² Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 99.

³³ Shawchuck and Heuser, *Leading the Congregation*, 42.

cappella. Inside I resisted this idea. In fact, I wrestled with being obedient all though the second verse because I really liked doing the key up and feeling the energy and emotional response that it gave, but in the end I knew I had to listen. It was a moment when God was teaching me that worship was about Him and that I was to worship Him according to His leading and not rely on my plans (or manipulations). Whatever the circumstance, we must hold this ministry in an open hand before God. John Bevere shares that God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush, but it was not until Moses “turned aside” that God spoke to Him.³⁴ There may be times that God wants to speak to us when we are in the busyness of leading, planning, or preparing, but God wants us to turn aside so He can speak to us and lead us. God has given us wonderful gifts and abilities to lead others into his presence, but we cannot lead until we are first led. We need to be open to the leading of the Spirit in our lives.

2. The Leader’s Character: Clean Hands and a Pure Heart

Though touched on earlier, there are few things as important in ministry as good character. It is the core of our being; it defines us and our ministries. In fact, without Godly character, we will not last long in worship ministry, for God is continually calling us to new depths in Him when we enter His presence. In fact, one should not even enter this ministry until one is sure that God is calling them to it!

Don’t get me wrong: Competencies are absolutely necessary for someone to be an effective leader. But unless you are crystal-clear about what God has called you to lead people toward, what leadership means to him, and how incredibly significant your character is in gaining God’s stamp of approval and people’s trust, all the skills and competencies in the world aren’t going to get you where you need to go. In the long run, leadership effectiveness hinges on who you are rather than on what you do.³⁵

Character is the heart of who we are and is played out in what we do. God is just not looking for Godly actions, but an inwardly transformed person. We may express a reverence for God; we

³⁴ Bevere, *Drawing Near*, 6.

³⁵ George Barna, *A Fish Out of Water* (Nashville, TN: Integrity Pub., 2002), xxx.

may lift our hearts in worship to Him; but we demonstrate the genuineness of our devotion to God by our earnest desire to be like Him.³⁶ So the question is, “How do I as a worship leader become more like Christ?”

Transformation

2 Corinthians 3 says we are “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Our character is continually refined by God’s Spirit—He leads us through the fire and the wilderness to test and purify us; He breaks us of self-dependency and pride and re-forms us on His potter’s wheel. We face difficult situations and circumstances, various hardships, and countless questions that test our faith, and yet through the times of crushing and perplexity we are better equipped to minister to others. Paul continues in chapter 4:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body (2 Cor. 4:7-11).

That is our goal as worship leaders: to be more like Christ so people do not see us, but Jesus in us! When we lead on a Sunday morning, do people see Jesus in our lives? What about when we are at the supermarket or the gas station? How do we react to situations in our lives? If we sin are we quick to repent? Do we surrender to His will and plan for our lives? Do we trust God when the waves of life crash in on us? How you react to the circumstances of life will determine your character! As Dallas Willard says, “The individual soul’s specific formation—the character it has

³⁶ Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996), 56.

taken on through its life course—is seen in the details of how thoughts, feelings, social relations, bodily behaviors, and choices unfold, and especially how they interact with each other.”³⁷

The process of this transformation differs in each person as the Lord sees fit, but the process escapes none that accept God’s calling. Transformation comes with the calling, for God cannot use a vessel that has not been changed or has not submitted to His Lordship. As Gordon MacDonald states,

The forming of the soul that it might be a dwelling place for God is the primary work of the Christian leader. This is not an add-on, an option, or a third-level priority. Without this core activity, one almost guarantees that he/she will not last in leadership for a lifetime or that what work is accomplished will become less and less reflective of God’s honor and God’s purposes.³⁸

At the heart of this inner renovation is the identity of self: am I my own or am I the Lord’s? The Apostle Paul exhorts us in 1 Corinthians 6 that we are not our own but were bought with a price. Jesus tells us in Matthew 16:25 that “whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”³⁹

In other words, when Jesus says that those who find their life or soul shall lose it, he is pointing out that those who think they are in control of their life—“I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul,” as the poet William Ernest Henley said—will find that they definitely are not in control: they are totally at the mercy of forces beyond them, and even within them. They are on a sure course to disintegration and powerlessness, of lostness both to themselves and to God. They must surrender.⁴⁰

At the heart of one transformed is a heart that is surrendered to God and His ways. One is content and secure in finding their identity not in themselves or in the work of their hands, but solely in the work and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Waves and storms may rage but we are at peace knowing who has called us and that we can never be taken from His hand. But this

³⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 201.

³⁸ Gordon MacDonald, “Cultivating the Soul: Spiritual Formation Can Happen Without Saying a Word,” *Leadership* Vol. XXVI (Summer 2005): 51.

³⁹ See also Mark 8:34-37 and Luke 9:23-25.

⁴⁰ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 65.

security can only be attained when we have met with God in the place of solitude—the place where no one else can be nor interrupt. As Henri Nouwen puts it,

Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of false self. Jesus himself entered into this furnace. There he was tempted with the three compulsions of the world: to be relevant (“turn stones into bread”), to be spectacular (“throw yourself down”), and to be powerful (“I will give you all these kingdoms”). There he affirmed God as the only source of His identity (“You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone”). Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter—the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.⁴¹

Those who have been transformed do not fret or toil for relevance. They do not concern themselves with being spectacular by pleasing and entertaining man. They have no need to be powerful by controlling people or circumstances. Rather, they are content in knowing who they are in Christ; to be less so He is greater; to be the servants of all. As Paul declares,

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (Col. 1:28-29 – emphasis mine).

As Paul recognized, this ministry is God’s and we can only accomplish this great task with His strength. Let us continue to surrender our lives over to the Potter and allow Him to change us so that He may be glorified in our lives.

Integrity and Holiness

In the brokenness of our transformed lives, God seeks to build integrity and holiness. Integrity is uprightness of character; being honest and above reproach. As Rory Noland says, “Character is becoming who God made us to be, and integrity is doing what God wants us to do.”⁴² Holiness implies a separation from ungodliness to a life of sanctity and purity. For the worship leader, both integrity and holiness are essential. Worship ministry is a very “visible”

⁴¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 25-26.

⁴² Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 38.

ministry and as such we are always in the public eye. We are role models and representatives of Christ everyday and so our lives must reflect these godly characteristics. Noland adds,

We expect pastors to be godly people. We expect them to walk intimately with Christ and have godly character. We expect them to be living in righteousness and not leading a double life. Why don't we expect the same from our musicians, our drama people, and all our other artists? We're not just artists. We are ministers too. We stand on the same platform and address the congregation with the same message. Shouldn't we aspire to high standards of integrity, just like the pastor? The qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 can be applied to *all* leaders in the church, and that includes artists. We are to be above reproach; loyal to our spouses; not self-willed or quick tempered; prudent; respectable; hospitable; able to teach; not addicted to anything; not pugnacious but gentle; uncontentious; free from the love of money; able to handle our households well; and we must have a good reputation with those outside the church (1 Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:7-9).⁴³

Paul Baloche adds,

If we expect to lead worship every week, we have to keep short accounts with God. We cannot allow sins to fester un-confessed and un-dealt with. Failing to do so jeopardizes, first, our relationship with God, but also the excellence of worship that we are offering. While that is a great responsibility it's also one of the great blessings of serving the Church. When we get in front of a group of people, week in and week out, who knows us, who can almost read our facial expressions, who can read our hearts, we must deal with the sin in our lives.⁴⁴

We are not called to be people of integrity and holiness just for the sake of man, but for God in that a holy vessel is useful to the Master. In 2 Timothy 2:20-21 Paul tells us,

²⁰In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. ²¹If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

If we want to be used by God, then we have to be pure vessels available for Him to pour through.

The last thing we as worship leaders would want is for our lives to be a hindrance to God's plan in His church, but rather that we can be useful for any "good work."

⁴³ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁴ Paul Baloche, "The Heart of Excellent Worship," *Worship Leader*, July/August 2005, 24.

In many ways, recounting the inherent value of integrity and holiness in the life of a worship leader seems almost basic. We all generally agree that such characteristics are necessary for ministry but do we strive for godliness in the everyday of life or just to the extent that our ministry requires of us? Are we, as Paul challenges, running the race so as to receive the prize or are we coasting along content to just cross the finish line before the race is over? Far too many worship leaders are deceived into thinking that they have an intimate relationship with God or that God approves their lifestyle because they see His blessing on their ministry.

There are many who are gifted by the Spirit of God, yet they do not keep the words of the Master with all their heart. They are the people who can be most easily deceived. The reason is the presence of the Lord will be sensed to a degree in their gifting, such as their preaching, singing, praying, or other form of ministry. . . The deception is that these people can easily assume that the presence of the Lord that is on them in ministry is His approval of their lives, and mistake that presence for intimacy with Him.⁴⁵

The pursuit of godliness cannot be based on cognitive thinking alone (basing it solely on the act of will or external factors such as ministry success), but it must come from the depths within one's spirit. The apostle Paul was not running his race just so he could be called the greatest apostle to ever live, but he was running to the One who called him to be an apostle. This quest for holiness may only begin with a spark, but that spark should grow till it becomes a flame—a desire to live a life wholly pleasing to God.⁴⁶ If we are truly walking with the Lord, then we should also have a desire to be holy before the Lord.

So what does this look like for us? No doubt integrity and holiness prove themselves in godly living—though tempted, we chose not to sin and thus it is an act of will. But godly action must stem from godly desire. Remember again the words of Isaiah that God was not pleased with the worship of lips when their hearts were far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). We must surrender not just our actions to the Potter, but our very hearts, striving to be a pure and holy vessel for His

⁴⁵ Bevere, *Drawing Near*, 121.

⁴⁶ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1978), 38.

use. “To stay on course as worship leaders, we must revisit the reasons we sing. If our song leading is really motivated and marked by our pursuit of Jesus and his purposes, we’ll be singing with a right heart.”⁴⁷

Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution

In striving for integrity and holiness in our lives, we see that it is often tested and refined through our experiences with other people. We all have different characteristics and personalities, different gifts and values, and because of these differences, conflict and the need for forgiveness are inevitable. Yet as worship leaders, we need to be able to resolve conflict as well as extend and receive forgiveness and grace so that we do not impede the flow of God’s Spirit in our lives and ministries.

Worship leaders are in a strange place; we have the privilege of creating a space of surrender for people to offer the adoration of their hearts over to God. The problem is that our position also carries a responsibility, one that requires our hearts to be in a place of worship before Sunday morning. And just like everyone else, we deal with allergies. We deal with missing our taxes, paying bills, experiencing the emotional needs of our families and every other thing that comes with real life.⁴⁸

In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus tells us, “if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” God is not pleased with worship that is stained from unresolved conflict. Why? Well there are a few reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, God wants not just action in worship but our hearts as well. If our heart is preoccupied with conflict, then we should hold our actions until there is resolution. Second, when conflict abounds, disunity prevails and our God loves unity in the Spirit. As Paul writes,

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, *bearing with one another in love*. ³Make every effort to *keep the unity of the Spirit* through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one

⁴⁷ Park, *To Know You More*, 51.

⁴⁸ Baloche, “The Heart of Excellent Worship,” *Worship Leader*, July/August 2005, 24.

body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1-6, emphasis mine).

As worship leaders we will be working with many different types of people: pastors, artists, audio and visual technicians, lay volunteers, and every range of congregational members. No doubt conflict will arise, but how one deals with that conflict is of utmost importance. You may need to discipline, encourage, submit, teach, confess your fault, or forgive, but above all, love! Communication and positive affirmations will help head off potential conflict with those you work with⁴⁹ and if conflict has arisen you need the courage to be able to confront it!⁵⁰

The basic principle for resolving conflict is quite simple: go to the person you're in conflict with and talk it out. That's what Jesus taught. . . Keep in mind that this process to work through a relational conflict may take more than one meeting. . . Sometimes it takes several face-to-face discussions.⁵¹

We don't want anything to hinder the flow of the Spirit in our lives and in the church, so let us strive to work through and forgive those that we have found ourselves in conflict with.

3. The Leader as a Servant

As we follow the Lord and come to know him more, we begin to gain greater understanding of who He is and subsequently who we are and what we are supposed to be. In fact, we cannot serve Him or others adequately until we are changed to be more like Christ.

Knowing God changes more than our actions; it changes us. We become different people. We are in the process of being conformed more and more in our character and in our actions to the image of God. My point is that this process goes on only as we get to know God more and more. We cannot be active servants of God as he intended without knowing him.⁵²

We can extend hope because we have been given hope; we minister peace because we have tasted of His peace; we show love because we have come to know His love. As the psalmist

⁴⁹ Liesch, *The New Worship*, 214.

⁵⁰ Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 252.

⁵¹ Rory Noland, *Thriving as an Artist in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 84-85.

⁵² Andrew T. Le Peau, *Paths of Leadership* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 20.

experienced God in Psalm 34:8 (“Taste and see that the LORD is good”), we too are able to minister to others because we have experienced God ourselves.

Only those who have experienced salvation from the living God learn what it means to worship Him. During my devotional life, I reflect on what God has done for me. This motivates me to praise God with everything that is within me. It is not just the story of redemption that excites me; it is the reality that the story of redemption has invaded my personal life. It is the reality that I am one of the characters in God’s glorious plan: the salvation of a depraved human being who is daily being transformed into a worshiper of the living God. I am a worship leader because I have personally experienced the essence of true worship: salvation.⁵³

In so much that we have come to know God and who we are in Him—His servant and His child; His beloved yet slaves to righteousness—we can be secure in our identity and subsequently in the ministry we have been called to. We serve the Lord and others out of desire and not just duty and are not threatened with rejection or criticism but remain teachable, being willing to be used for God’s glory. Because we are confident in our identity with Christ, we have nothing to prove but are content with transparency and are not threatened or jealous with the successes of others. In essence, the servant-heart is concerned more with pleasing the Master than oneself. The desire to serve should be stronger than the desire to lead—so that leadership becomes a means of serving.⁵⁴

In so much that we serve God out of our understanding of who He is and subsequently who we are, and knowing that we are under His authority, we also recognize as worship leaders that we are under the authority of the church leadership. Worship ministry is not about us pushing our own agenda, but rather that we work together with the other leaders to minister to the Lord and the congregation. As Rory Noland puts it, “Submitting to church authority is a sign of character.”⁵⁵ We may disagree at times, but we need to choose to honor one another and

⁵³ Kevin J. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Leader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 59.

⁵⁴ Shawchuck and Heuser, *Leading the Congregation*, 35.

⁵⁵ Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 108.

submit to existing authority. Hebrews 13:17 makes this very clear: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” This in no way takes away from ministry being a team effort, but rather we seek to honor God first and foremost knowing that He has placed leaders over us and along side us to guide us, challenge us, and serve with us.

It is also of utmost importance that one remains loyal and unified with the pastor. I remember when I was entering my internship and the intern director warned me at the time that my job was to support the pastor and not allow congregational members to “get me on their side” against him in any way. The same principle has proved itself today in my ministry in that there have been times people have sought to complain about my pastor, but I seek to remain loyal and communicate constantly with him about any concerns. “Trust and loyalty between pastors and musicians are essential if the pastor/worship director relationship is to be effective. The depth of loyalty and confidence each other has for the other determines each leader’s ability to lead.”⁵⁶

Tom McDonald adds,

Any long-term relationship most assuredly contains the element of trust. A pastor must trust his worship leader; a worship leader must trust his pastor. Trust grows as advice is heeded and outcomes prove fruitful. We are, however, human beings—wounded healers who occasionally conceive a faulty plan or a bad idea. It is then that the pastoral relationship is tested. Some pastors only want yes men. Some worship leaders wear their feelings on their sleeves and cannot handle a constructive word without being temperamental. Somewhere in the middle lies maturity—the ability to assess ideas, an environment of mutual trust and respect. Debunking a bad idea before it goes public is always a gift to a leader who is secure.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Liesch, *The New Worship*, 211.

⁵⁷ Tom McDonald, “Seven Habits of Highly Effective Worship Leaders,” *Enrichment Journal*, April 2004 [document on-line].; available from http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200104/110_seven_habits_.cfm. Internet; accessed 26 Aug. 2005.

In respect to the congregation, the worship leader must also carry the same servant heart as we see in Christ. We are reminded that we are to build one another up in the faith through such things as psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16), but sometimes worship leaders can be guilty of verbally abusing the congregation when they do not see the response that they want!⁵⁸ This is not being a servant. As servants of our congregation, we seek to encourage people to worship in various ways: scriptural readings, silence, artistic expression, celebration of new and older music (it may not be your “taste” but we need to serve our congregation holistically), prayer, etc. Worship ministry is not about a leader’s personal agenda, but is about serving the Lord and the community of believers. As such, we cannot restrict worship music to personal favorites.⁵⁹

Congregational service means being willing to “lay our lives down” on a consistent basis. True there will be times when we are criticized and hurt from the people we serve (in which we need to balance vulnerability with being “thick-skinned”), but this is part of the depth that Christ has called us to in Him.

Musicians are notoriously thin-skinned when it comes to criticism. One negative comment can put someone into a funk that lasts for days. Yet without feedback it is impossible to know how you're doing. At some point successful worship leaders learn not to take feedback too personally, whether negative or positive. Instead they sift it for what can be learned and disregard the rest.⁶⁰

We are commanded in Scripture to offer our bodies as living sacrifices as an act of worship/service (Romans 12:1) and to serve one another with love (Galatians 5:13). Scripture never tells us such service is easy or without sacrifice, in fact, the opposite is usually true: true

⁵⁸ Kenoly and Bernal, *Lifting Him Up*, 48.

⁵⁹ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1995), 177.

⁶⁰ Robert Redman, “Learning Strategies for the Long Haul,” *What Worship Leaders Need to Know, Part 2*, no date available [document on-line]; available from <http://www.ccli.com/WorshipResources/Articles.cfm?itemID=20>; Internet; accessed 26 Aug. 2005.

loving service means laying down our lives for others! Still, we need balance, for this does not mean that we are to be “yes men” to everyone else’s whim, but we are to serve others as we serve the Lord! Servant leadership is not you doing everything or being a “door mat,” but simply leading by example and loving the flock as Christ does. As Martin Luther noted, “A Christian Man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”⁶¹ May God give us wisdom to serve Him, our families, our pastor(s), and our congregation with diligence, wisdom, and integrity!

4. The Leader’s Motivation: Lessons from Moses

Years ago my non-Christian grandfather would tease me about wanting to go into full-time ministry. He would say, “Are you going to be a pastor so you can strike it rich like all those TV evangelists?” No doubt the comment indicated a black-eye for Christianity’s image, but by and large if a big salary was my main motivation in life I would not have entered the ministry! Still, what is our motivation for worship ministry? Why have we chosen this path of leadership? And for those that have been here longer, why do we continue? The reasons can be many. Here are a few, though this list is certainly not exhaustive:

- we may find personal fulfillment in using our artistic and spiritual gifts;
- we may like the “rush” of leading so many people;
- we may be motivated out of our desire for authority;
- we may have never wanted to lead people but God (or man) has placed you there.

Whatever the reason for being where we are, whether positive or negative, we need to clearly examine our motivations for involvement in this ministry on a regular basis.

Humility: It’s not about me!

Moses was a man who had it all. He was the prince of Egypt, educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, never hungered, never was without, but he started off his leadership campaign

⁶¹ Martin Luther, quoted by Andrew Le Peau, *Paths of Leadership*, 15.

on the wrong foot... his! He took matters into his own hands. *Even though he sensed his calling correctly*, he acted on his own authority. And he made a major mistake! He could even have possibly ruined God's plan and purpose for his life. And it cost his people another forty years of suffering while God worked to remake Moses into the right kind of deliver.⁶² Still, after the burning bush experience, everything changed for Moses. He was given purpose, he was under authority, he performed miraculous signs, was the leader of his people, and talked with God face to face. Unfortunately he continued to make mistakes, but despite all the ups and downs and powerful ways that God had used him, he was known as the most humble man on earth (Num. 12:3). But what is humility?

John Bevere defines humility within three aspects: first our obedience to God; second, our utter dependence on Him; and third, our view of ourselves.⁶³ When Moses encountered the Almighty, he gained a whole new purpose for his life and a new perspective of who God was. Now he was sent out with a mission of deliverance under authority. This mission was greater than anything he could do himself—it required his obedience, he was utterly dependent, and upon meeting God face to face he understood well where he stood and where his authority came from. As worship leaders, we too must realize we are under authority and that this is not a self-made ministry. We are called to obedience, we are called to dependence, and we must come to a proper view of who we are in respect to God's hand on our lives. In leading others into worship, we must walk in humility. We see this outlined for us in Scripture in that God commends the humble of heart and delights to see it in His people.

For this is what the high and lofty One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
“I live in a high and holy place,
but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit,

⁶² LePeau, *Paths of Leadership*, 40-41.

⁶³ Bevere, *Drawing Near*, 127.

to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isaiah 57:15).

And again in Isaiah 66:1-2:

¹ This is what the LORD says:
“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
Where is the house you will build for me?
Where will my resting place be?
² Has not my hand made all these things,
and so they came into being?”
declares the LORD.
“This is the one I esteem:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word.”

God has called us to obedience in worship ministry and thus as we follow and obey Him, He is due all praise for the fruit derived from the ministry. Jerry Bridges states,

We should ascribe any attainments, whether secular or spiritual, to the grace of God. When Moses was giving final instructions to the children of Israel prior to entering the promised land, he specifically warned them against the pride that comes with taking credit for successes: “You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). Paul was just as emphatic about spiritual success when he wrote, “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Corinthians 3:7).⁶⁴

May we come to a healthy realization of who we are in God’s eyes, what we have been called to, and who deserves all praise and glory in our lives. Let us walk in humility, knowing that we, and our ministry, are the Lord’s!

Remembering the Goal: The presence of the Lord

Shortly after being freed from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites found themselves stuck between Pharaoh’s army and the Red Sea. They began to panic and said to Moses,

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt,

⁶⁴ Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness*, 79.

‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? *It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert*” (Exod. 14:11-12, emphasis mine).

We see here that their desire and motivation was for whatever was in their best interest and subsequently overrode their desire to fulfill God’s will. They were not concerned about God’s plan for their lives, but rather were consumed with a love for their own lives.⁶⁵ This pattern of grumbling and complaining marked their desert journey over the next forty years, but Moses’ core motivation was different. In Exodus 33 we find God telling Moses that He is going to send His angel to lead the people instead of His presence, otherwise He may be tempted to destroy them along the way (Ex. 33:1-3). But Moses wouldn’t hear of it! He said, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here” (v.15). Where was *here*? It was the wilderness! There was nothing appealing about that place. Moses was basically saying that he would rather have God’s presence in the unwanted and uncomfortable than a land of abundance and beauty void of His presence! This set Moses apart from the children of Israel. They sought God for what He did while Moses sought God for who He is!⁶⁶

Is our core motivation the same as Moses’? Do we desire God’s presence above all else, or are we guilty of grumbling and complaining when things don’t happen like we think they should? Do we serve God for what is in it for us or do we serve Him because He is our desire?

As Rory Noland looks over his life, he says,

I’m not ashamed to say that I need the Lord in my life these days, probably more now than ever before. I need His wisdom and strength. I need to talk to Him and hear His voice. Apart from Him I know I can do nothing (John 15:5). I wouldn’t think of trying to do life without spending time with the Lord. I don’t understand how non-Christians can live without Christ, but it is even further beyond me why Christians try to live without Him. I don’t understand why we make a commitment to follow Jesus but then don’t spend time with Him. I feel so strongly about this that if I were on my deathbed, my last

⁶⁵ Bevere, *Drawing Near*, 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

words of advice to anyone who would listen would be, “Spend time with the Lord.” It’s the greatest privilege in all of life.⁶⁷

We are desperately needy as worship leaders. We face pressures in ministry that at times can feel unbearable: we can be criticized, stereotyped, and ostracized one week and totally loved the next; we have to try and achieve some sort of balance in worship expression between the generations; we may be expected to have an “energetic worship time” on Sunday morning and yet it may have been a very difficult week; we have to work with all kinds of people and the many conflicts that can ensue as well as deal with technical troubles five minutes before a service. There are many possible pressures that worship leaders can face, so it is all the more important that we take time to realign ourselves with our core motivation: seeking and being in the presence of God. We need personal times of study, prayer, and worship with the Lord. We need to take time with Him to be refreshed and replenished, especially after we have ministered. Recently, on a Saturday, I officiated my first funeral which was for a fourteen year old youth who died of cancer. The next day I was standing before the congregation and leading in corporate worship. After such a draining weekend of ministry, I needed to once again spend personal time with the Lord, being refreshed in His presence. If our goal is to fulfill our own agenda in worship ministry, then we will burn out, but if we are motivated by God’s presence, knowing that it is in His presence that we find our life and sustenance, then let us continue to minister out of this grace and seek to know him more and more.

A Word of Caution:

As worship leaders must guard ourselves from the misconception that we are somehow “engineers” of God’s presence. Trying to control or make manifest the presence of God is about as likely as trying to control the wind—impossible! (John 3:8). Yet God, in his great

⁶⁷ Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 320.

omnipresence, has chosen to reveal himself uniquely to us in times of corporate gatherings. Why is this? God loves and blesses the unity of His body! In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus is telling us to be reconciled with our brother, “for where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (v.20). Psalm 133 says,

How good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in unity!
It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down upon the collar of his robes.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.

The Lord bestows the blessing of His presence on His people when they come together in unity to seek His face. He loves to reveal Himself to us and in doing so meets our every need, for all that we need is found in Him (Acts 17:25; 2 Cor. 9:8). If we come together with wrongful motives or selfish ambition, how can we expect the Lord’s blessing to abound? The Corinthian church were chastised by Paul for not eating the Lord’s supper together but were in essence bringing judgment on themselves for sinning against the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:17ff). They may have had wonderful music, a great kid’s program, outstanding preachers, but God was not pleased with them because they were not serving others, but only themselves. God’s presence is not reliant on great programs or star Christians (or super-worship leaders), but rather on His blessing on the unity and sincerity of His church. So, as leaders, we need to encourage unity in the body and practice it with our expression of worship. We need to serve and honor the various generations with humility. We cannot make God “show up” or reveal Himself to us, but we can surrender our lives and agendas to Him and encourage the church to seek God and worship Him together. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the

believers as they were gathered together seeking God in one place (Acts 2). God is still blessing us with the freshness of His presence today when we seek Him in unity with pure motivations.

The Giver not the Gift: Keeping God First

I seek the Giver not the gift
My heart's desire is to lift You
High above all earthly kings
To bring You pleasure Lord⁶⁸

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses is charging his people not to forget the Lord as they enter the new land, thus becoming self-reliant, but to remember that “man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (v.3). As worship leaders, there are many obstacles that can arise that seek to derail our focus away from the Lord. We are part of a very visible ministry and can at times be tempted to rate our ministry success by the visual responsiveness of the congregation. We can also make our musicianship supreme to the neglect of spiritual refreshment, or we can become so people-focused that we lose sight of the Lord and His will. Yet Matthew 6:33 reminds us that we are to seek first the kingdom of God; in essence, we are to keep God first in our lives above the gifts and abilities that He has given to us. Our motivation, then, should not be for the furtherance of our abilities or prominence, but simply in the joy of discovering the heart of God. As Andy Park states,

Our first and foremost role in life is not as a *worship leader*, but as a *child of God*. God is first of all interested in loving us. If we receive his love, we have something to give away. To be really free in worship leading, I have to know that God is fond of me. Without confidence before God, I can't function in any capacity—as a child of God, a husband, father or worship leader. How can I confidently lead others if I am not sure how he feels about me? Unless I know I'm right with God, I can't have peace. All the tricks of the trade in worship leading won't help me if I'm not sure that God loves and accepts me.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Bonnie Deuschle, *I Bow My Knee* (Verse 2) © 1990 Integrity's Hosanna! Music.

⁶⁹ Park, *To Know You More*, 49.

Not only do we need to know God's love for us personally, but we need to acknowledge His sovereignty over all creation and that we are His servants to whom our lives are dedicated. Isaiah describes God as incomparable, who measures the waters with His hand and sits enthroned above the earth, yet comforts His people and renews their strength (Isaiah 40). We serve an awesome God who cares about our every need! George Barna adds,

Leadership is simply one expression of your Christian-ness. Your calling and ability to lead are much less important to the God who created you than is your determination to know him deeply and love him every moment of your life. . . This, then, is one of the paradoxes of Christian leadership: The excellence of your leadership depends more on the quality of your relationship with God than on the application of the gifts and resources he has given you for success in leading people.⁷⁰

As we seek to discover the Giver, and find ourselves in Him, we will learn to be content with what He has already given us. I remember a few questions that God asked me years ago that caused me to search out my motivation for serving Him. He asked, "If I never blessed you again would you still serve me? If I never gave you anything more, would I be enough for you?" I must admit that I wrestled with those questions for some time before being able to say "yes." Yet, as God had spoken to Moses in Exodus 3:14, He is "I AM"—He is the Gift; He is the Blessing; He is healing; He is everything we need! May we come to find that God is everything we need in our lives as worship leaders!

Reflecting His Glory: Modeling a Heart after God

We all know the old adage, "Better caught than taught," and in worship ministry it is no different. People will not follow your leadership and enter into worship because of your great skill, but they will enter in to worship much more readily if they see a life of worship being modeled for them. We do not put on a guise each Sunday to lead people because it is our job, but we come ready to worship because it is the calling of our heart! This does not mean we are

⁷⁰ Barna, *A Fish Out of Water*, 155-156.

always “on” all the time (as Jesus states, “in this world you will have trouble” ~ Jn. 16:33), but we face life with integrity and authenticity of heart—revealing Christ in our lives by example.

1. Leading by example: being a worshiper

It can become quite easy to get so busy in worship ministry with practices, technical problems, scheduling, transitions, etc., that we forget the simplicity of what we have been called to: worship! We can be as the Church in Ephesus, so good at church related activity yet guilty of forsaking our first love (Rev. 2:1-4). A mindset like that has it backwards. As Andy Park reiterates, “We are first worshipers and then worship leaders.”⁷¹

Whether we fully realize it, the congregation watches us as we lead and as we live. We are not just music leaders; we are role models too and we influence the culture of our churches.⁷² People are looking for an example, and it is our privilege to set a positive one for them. As LePeau puts it, “People watch us and become like us whether we like it or not. If we do in fact want people to be like us, one of the first things we can do is let them watch us on purpose.”⁷³ We see the importance of setting a good example all throughout Scripture: 1 Peter 5:2-3 challenges us to be shepherds to the flock, willingly, setting an example for the believers; David was said to have led his people with integrity of heart and skillful hands (Psalm 78:72); and Paul exhorts Titus, “In everything set them an example by doing what is good” (Titus 2:7). What example are we setting? Do people see us engaging with God? Can we, like Paul, challenge those around us with all integrity to follow our example as we follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1)?

We as leaders influence the culture of our churches, and this is especially true of the pastor. If you want to know what kind of church you have, look at the pastor. If he/she is

⁷¹ Park, *To Know You More*, 15.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷³ Le Peau, *Paths of Leadership*, 96.

passionate, the church will catch that passion. If he/she is welcoming, the people will be welcoming. If he/she is a worshiper, then the congregation will be worshipers.

When it comes to forming the congregation in the Spirit of Christ, two things of importance stand out in bold relief: First, the pastor must be on the journey; the pastor cannot lead where he or she has never been. Second, the congregation will not journey beyond the pastor; the congregation will not venture where the pastor is not leading.⁷⁴

As the pastor sets the spiritual climate of the church, those leading in worship will follow and subsequently lead the congregation down the same path (and ultimately the same attitude toward worship). If we want our church to be a passionate, worshiping community, then the pastor and church leadership must set the example for the rest of the church to follow by being obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit. There have been many Sundays when even though I have ended the music portion of the service that our pastor will come forward and continue to encourage the church to express their worship to the Lord or come forward to seek the Lord for various needs (healing, discouragement, personal freedom, etc.). Many of the board members come forward to pray over people. Truly these are the most powerful services for us as people see a deep-seeded passion for Christ reflected at all levels of the church leadership.

2. Being real: Authentic worship amidst real life

To be a leader a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. . . . If a man's associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose.
~ Dwight Eisenhower⁷⁵

People are not just looking for an example of how to worship on Sunday morning; they want to see authentic worship lived out in our lives. There will be times when life stinks because you're sick or you've smashed up your car or you've lost someone very close to you—these are

⁷⁴ Shawchuck and Heuser, *Leading the Congregation*, 126.

⁷⁵ Le Peau, *Paths of Leadership*, 89.

the times when the integrity of our faith is tested. Can we trust God in the storms? Can we praise Him in the wilderness? Do we worship Him when we feel we don't know where He is?

All leaders are role models. We are example-setters. So we need to live the kind of lives we ask our followers to live—lives they would want to emulate. Paul said, “Join with others in following my example. . . Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put into practice” (Philippians 3:17; 4-9). That doesn't mean we must be perfect or hide our struggles from those we lead. On the contrary, people need to see us living authentic Christian lives, and that includes the ups and downs.⁷⁶

It is so easy to get on stage each week and put on a “Christian mask” that fools everyone into thinking that everything is A-ok, but people need to see authenticity in our lives. They need to see that we wrestle with God at times, that we struggle with feelings and pain, that being a Christian does not mean being perfect, but carrying a willful attitude of surrender to God in the everyday. There are many psalms of lament where we see the psalmists wrestling with God:

- **Psalm 6** (esp. v.1-3)

¹O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.

²Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint;
O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.

³My soul is in anguish.
How long, O LORD, how long?

- **Psalm 42**

³My tears have been my food
day and night,
while men say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”...

⁹I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

- **Psalm 142**

¹I cry aloud to the LORD;
I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.

²I pour out my complaint before him;
before him I tell my trouble.

⁷⁶ Noland, *Thriving as an Artist in the Church*, 176.

³ When my spirit grows faint within me,
 it is you who know my way.
 In the path where I walk
 men have hidden a snare for me.
⁴ Look to my right and see;
 no one is concerned for me.
 I have no refuge;
 no one cares for my life.
⁵ I cry to you, O LORD;
 I say, "You are my refuge,
 my portion in the land of the living."
⁶ Listen to my cry,
 for I am in desperate need;
 rescue me from those who pursue me,
 for they are too strong for me.
⁷ Set me free from my prison,
 that I may praise your name.
 Then the righteous will gather about me
 because of your goodness to me.

Jesus promised us in John 16:33 that "In this world you will have trouble." Things will not always go as planned, the church as a whole may struggle at times, you may go through seasons of personal trial and struggle, but how you react to the circumstances in life will reveal your character and the authenticity of your faith. The struggles offer us an opportunity to know God in a deeper way and thus not just have a superficial understanding of His ways. We are called to be leaders of integrity who don't necessarily know all the answers, but are seeking the One who can answer our cry. I love the depth of the call to worship God in both the good and bad times in the song "Blessed be your Name" by Matt and Beth Redman:

Blessed Be Your Name

Verse 1

Blessed be Your name
 In the land that is plentiful
 Where Your streams of abundance flow
 Blessed be Your name
 And blessed be Your name
 When I'm found in the desert place
 Though I walk through the wilderness

Blessed be Your name

Chorus

Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise
And when the darkness closes in
Lord still I will say
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name

Verse 2

Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's all as it should be
Blessed be Your name
And blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

Bridge

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord blessed be Your name⁷⁷

Let us strive to be godly examples of faith in real life situations. Let us be transparent enough to show people that we can trust God even when we can't see Him. Let us lead people authentically in worship through both mountaintop and wilderness experiences.

The Leader Under Grace

In so much that we will struggle with real life situations, temptations, and imperfections it is of vital importance that we recognize that we are a people saved, living, and ministering under grace. We will not, nor can not, be "perfect" in leadership. We will always have relational conflict in ministry; there will always be a better musician or singer than us; we will never please

⁷⁷ Matt and Beth Redman, *Blessed Be Your Name* © 2002 Thankyou Music (Admin. by EMI Christian Music Publishing).

everybody (nor can we); we will battle pride and temptations; we will struggle in balancing family life and ministry. But though we struggle we need to realize that our acceptance in Christ is not based on our perfection or performance, but simply because He loves us and has extended His grace to us. “Let God be God. He alone is perfect. It’s one of the reasons why we worship Him and not ourselves. Artists who strive for perfection are chasing the wind. It’s folly. We’re not perfect—never have been and never will be.”⁷⁸ Because we are limited, imperfect, finite leaders, we must come to an understanding of grace in our leadership or perfectionism will destroy our ministry.

Grace from God: His Empowering Strength

Grace is usually defined as unmerited favor, but a mentor of mine also used to say that grace is God’s empowering strength to carry on. Most people in the church do not realize the amount of work that goes into ministry. They see the fruit of the work on a Sunday morning and joke that pastors and other leaders have the other six days of the week off! Nothing could be further from the truth! Ministry is hard work—it is hard emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally. We need to care for ourselves while caring for others. Because of this, we desperately need God’s empowering strength to do the work at hand.

God called you to leadership, not perfection, but he expects each of us, regardless of our gift and calling to invest ourselves in the pursuit of spiritual maturity. The more complete we become in Christ, the more effective we will be in taking the point on the march toward his vision for us. Unless we are continually growing in our faith and the outworking of our faith, though, we lose the spiritual edge that serves as the point in our efforts to penetrate the world’s darkness. . . The growth will not come without a cost, but your effort will ensure that you have something of value to give and the strength with which to wage the good fight of faith.⁷⁹

Chris Falson uses the imagery of being a tree planted by the water (Jer. 17). If we don’t learn to be still before the Lord and receive from Him, we will wither. But, if we draw daily from Him in

⁷⁸ Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 124.

⁷⁹ Barna, *A Fish Out of Water*, 167-168.

His presence, knowing that it is not our plans for success that sustains us, we will be fruitful in what we do.⁸⁰ We need God's enabling strength every day. We need to draw from Him our refreshment and spiritual nourishment and rest from unnecessary striving. He has not called us to be perfectionists, just faithful to be obedient to the task of the call. The Apostle Peter understood this! Remember his words in 1 Peter 4:10-11:

¹⁰Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, *he should do it with the strength God provides*, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (*emphasis mine*)

We are called to too great a task to be able handle it ourselves. We are called to be ambassadors of Christ, leading others into the presence of the divine. To this end we are powerless lest the Spirit of God leads us. It is in this great weakness that the strength, mercy and grace of God are made evident. As Henri Nouwen states,

It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is manifest. . . Powerlessness and humility in the spiritual life do not refer to people who let everyone else make decisions for them. They refer to people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with him, they will find life and find it abundantly.⁸¹

May we put aside our false expectations of perfectionism, and with it the dependency of self, and may we find ourselves being held in God's loving arms, knowing who we are in Him

Grace for ourselves: Allowing ourselves to learn

We not only need God's grace in our lives for the task that he has called us to, but we also must be willing to extend grace to ourselves learn from our mistakes. It can be far too common for us to carry our failings with us, mulling over them, and burying ourselves with condemnation.

⁸⁰ Falson, *Planted by the Water*, 186.

⁸¹ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 63-64.

Many artists are extremely insecure because they're overly perfectionistic. Because they criticize themselves over the smallest of mistakes, perfectionists struggle with self-esteem. When it reaches the point where your talent makes you feel no good or worthless as a person, your self-esteem is too wrapped up in what you do instead of who you are... be kind to the artist in you.⁸²

This means running the race with all our heart and not allowing ourselves to get hung-up on the failings of the past. It is not an easy race; it can be difficult, but we need to run and forget! Forget the paltry failures and deep disappointments. Forget the grand accomplishments and public acclaim. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and Galatians 5:7 challenge us to run well and in doing so may we lay down the memories that keep old wounds open, past failures stinging, and willful pride unbending—that we may, unencumbered, press on toward the prize that is inherent in our calling.⁸³

There will be times when we have come short of ours or others' expectations. When we have fallen short, we need to respond quickly to the Lord to make it right and continue on with His grace. We must allow grace for ourselves to grow and develop into the ministers and leaders we are called to be. Why? Because this ministry is not about us! This is the Lord's ministry and we are His ambassadors. Remember Paul's approach in 1 Corinthians 1 when the church was divided over who they were following: it is not Paul or Apollos, but Christ we serve, not with human wisdom, lest the cross be emptied of its power (1 Cor. 1:10-17). When we are unrealistic with our expectations of perfection, we are inherently taking the ministry upon ourselves and as such are no longer focusing on the Lord and His will but rather on how everything reflects on ourselves.

⁸² Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 121 & 125.

⁸³ Shawchuck and Heuser, *Leading the Congregation*, 303.

A Word of Caution here:

When we don't give ourselves grace to deal with our short-comings, we can carry them with us into our corporate ministry. While grace gives us liberty from the burdens of failures, but it does not give us permission to act inappropriately in how we lead others in worship. We should not carry our personal struggles into the time of corporate worship. Paul Baloche cautions,

At times over the years, I've caught myself projecting my own moods—frustration, anger, loneliness—when the church might not have been feeling the same emotions as me. I've seen it happen where the people enter a service relatively lighthearted, happy and ready to praise the Lord and the worship leader comes in, just off a bad morning, and immediately does five songs in a minor key and executes everything else with a heavy attitude—changing the whole environment to suit his or her needs. We need to be aware and examine our hearts before we lead a time of worship to make sure we're not unknowingly projecting some kind of mood onto the situation or the congregation.⁸⁴

Being under grace does not give us permission to be apathetic or complacent in ministry either. God desires that we run the race with all our heart, but if we happen to trip and fall on our face now and then, we need grace to get up and carry on. We are wounded healers who have skinned their knees and yet have found grace and mercy at the cross. Let us continue to walk in and extend that grace to those whom we serve.

Conclusion: The Journey

I want to be more like you, Jesus
I want to be more like you
I want to be a vessel you work through
I want to be more like you⁸⁵

Therein lies the heart of the worship minister—to reflect the life of Jesus! We follow Him through the good times and bad, we rejoice in His goodness and also suffer for His Name, we are tempted at times and yet called to minister through our weaknesses in His strength. This ministry

⁸⁴ Baloche, "The Heart of Excellent Worship," *Worship Leader*, July/August 2005, 25.

⁸⁵ Clint Brown, *I Want to be More Like You* © 1989 Integrity's Hosanna! Music.

is part of our journey. We walk with Christ, growing in Him, striving in the end to finish well and someday stand before Him receiving the reward of our obedience. As Dallas Willard states, “To run the race well, to be faithful over few things, is our part. And as we look at the road ahead, we must deal with the details... We take the long view of the race that is set before us. We don’t try to accomplish everything at once, and we don’t force things.”⁸⁶ For us, this means dealing with sin, discouragement, trials, praise, pitfalls, and other struggles as they arise. As Rory Noland challenges us, we need to take inventory of our lives to see where our character development is and how it is growing. This means asking ourselves tough questions on our actions and attitudes as they relate to:

- Servanthood
- Teamwork
- Perfectionism
- Defensiveness
- Jealousy or envy
- Managing emotions
- Leading artists
- Sin
- Spiritual disciplines⁸⁷

We are committed to a process of character development , knowing that God keeps working in our lives to conform us more and more to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).We are not, nor ever will be perfect while in this world, but as worship leaders, we strive more and more to know Christ. He is the goal of this race we run; He is the reward for those who serve Him; He is the One we seek and the One we serve.

What will it take to finish well? Again, in the stewardship parable in Matthew 25, Jesus tells us to be faithful in a few things. We see this theme again when Jesus said to Martha, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need only for one

⁸⁶ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 254.

⁸⁷ Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 41-45.

thing. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken from her” (Luke 10:38-41). What had she chosen? She chose the wonder of sitting at Jesus’ feet, absorbing His words and reveling in His presence. The writer of Hebrews challenges us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter (finisher) of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). To finish well means to keep Christ ever before us.⁸⁸ Are you walking after Him? Is He your leader in all things? Is your life and motivations totally surrendered to Him? Is your life a reflection of the grace and power of God in the everyday? Are we models to others of what worship is and can be?

Moses had tried doing things his way and failed, and so as he herded sheep for forty years God shaped him and prepared him for the day He would use Moses to deliver His people. God called to Moses in Exodus 3 from a burning bush saying (and I paraphrase), “I’ve seen the oppression of my people and heard their suffering, so I am going to rescue them! Oh, and Moses, I’m sending you!” You can almost see the look of shock on Moses’ face when he replied, “Who am I to lead these people?” But God would not let Moses off the hook, because he said “I will be with you!” We may feel like Moses, overwhelmed at the concept of living up to the calling, but rest assured, God has promised to be with us as we lead His people. But let us not forget that as we lead, we are being led!

I close with a short story from Bill Hybels’ book *Courageous Leadership* in which he challenges us to stay the course as we endeavor to finish well:

A few months ago a cruel disease took the life of one of my closest friends... Jon Rasmussen was a brother, a mentor, a sailing partner, a fellow soldier, a servant, a confidante, and truly one of the most remarkable men I’ve ever known.

Two days before his death I knelt by his bedside and told him one last time that I loved him with all my heart and that I would see him on the other side. With labored motion he reached for a present that he had arranged for me. Opening the carefully wrapped box, I discovered a beautiful silver mariner’s compass. Before I could protest his thoughtfulness and generosity, Jon whispered, “Bill, your life gave my life direction.

⁸⁸ Shawchuck and Heuser, *Leading the Congregation*, 302.

From the day we met, God used you to show me how my life could have purpose and meaning, and I can't thank you enough.

"Read the backside," he whispered. I read the three words engraved on the silver surface with tears in my eyes: "Stay the course." After reading those words I climbed onto the bed and embraced Jon for several moments, then prayed for him.

Two days later Jon died. Doing his funeral was one of the hardest things I've ever done. But I will treasure his final gift to me like few other earthly possessions I own.

Stay the course. Stay the course. Stay the course.

If I do—if all of us leaders do—we will win the day for the glory of the One whose name we bear.⁸⁹

May we as worship leaders stay the course and impact those we serve to new depths in Christ Jesus.

⁸⁹ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 252-253.

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