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WHAT ARE WE?

I have to be honest with you. This book is somewhat a reaction against what I have seen in the larger church culture of the world. The overwhelming misunderstanding of what a worship leader actually is and what the measure of success for a worship leader is has left me with a great measure of concern.

Even as I write this, I am dumbfounded, staring at an online ad that says, “Are you a worship leader? Click here to learn how to sign a record deal, get radio airplay, and start playing real paid gigs.”

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To be totally candid, I had three immediate reactions:

→ Anger

→ Grief

→ A little bit of throw-up in my mouth

At what point did the measure of success in ministry become record deals, radio play, and real gigs? Yet this is the definition of worship leading for much of the world. This has become the pursuit and the end goal.

Don't get me wrong; these are not bad things in and of themselves. If you are writing songs and producing quality art that a record label can come alongside to help take those songs to the larger church for the edification and encouragement of the masses, then by all means, go for it!

If you have a good song that I can hear on the radio instead of some musically mediocre theological train wreck of a song, then I am all for that.

If you are called to full-time vocational ministry, and you can provide for your family by leading the church in worship with excellence, you should be paid for your labor.

But the simple fact remains that most worship leaders will never have these things. For most, this is a completely unrealistic expectation or goal to have, and the overemphasis of these things as the measure of success has left scores of worship leaders feeling like broken failures.

Most worship leaders will plod away as bivocational ministers, never to be celebrated by anyone other than their local congregation and God Himself.

And that is okay.

So when I see anything that holds up an unhealthy, unhelpful measure of a successful worship leader, I react.

But in my reaction I want to be careful not to swing the pendulum and focus entirely on all the things that are wrong with a situation, rather than pointing to ways to take positive strides forward. I have seen this

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focus on “here’s what’s wrong” happen over and over again; and while it’s useful for building a following, it’s less helpful in digging us out of the proverbial lurch.

I have heard sermon after sermon preached completely in the negative. “The gospel is not this and the gospel is not that. The gospel does not _____ and the gospel does not _____.”

Many churches and ministries base their entire existence on what they are not. “We are not one of those churches that _____. When you come to our church, you’re not gonna see _____.”

The blogosphere is full of people who have made a name for themselves by ripping the many forms of the modern evangelical church to shreds.

For the first sixteen years of my life the only thing I heard about what it meant to be a Christian was, “Don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t chew, and don’t date girls who do.”

It is easier to criticize than to encourage.

So it would be really easy for me to write an entire book on all the things that a worship leader is not. But that wouldn’t actually move us any closer to an understanding of what exactly a worship leader is.

I use the term “worship leader” very intentionally.

It is not in the Bible and I know that there are many other titles that I could use that would potentially be less controversial. For example: song leader, music director, or even choir master if we’re going strictly biblical. After all, Jesus is our truest and ultimate worship leader—our High Priest

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and Mediator who leads us to the throne of God (something a man could never do) and allows us to worship by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Directly underneath Jesus stands the lead pastor of the local church, who functionally acts as the primary worship leader. While he may not lead the church in congregational singing (though he very well may), he is an undershepherd of the Chief Shepherd, joining with Jesus in directing the worship of the sheep in his care through the preaching of the Word and much, much more.


So with those things in mind, I want to answer very intentionally what may be the first objection or question that arises; namely, “Why call ourselves “worship leaders?””

Not only is “worship leader” an easily understood and widely identifiable title for the person who leads the church in corporate worship, but it is also perhaps the most helpful and descriptive because it refuses to limit the worship of God within the church to singing only. The Bible is clear that worship has an all-of-life-ness about it that can’t be relegated to just singing.

While singing has a powerful and unique role in worship, songs may be our smallest expression of worship. To call a worship leader a worship leader is to say that his responsibilities go far beyond simply leading the church in singing some songs.

A worship leader is to be a person who exemplifies worship in all areas of life as an example for the church to emulate; who pursues God with everything and lives a life of holiness that worships through obedience in all things; who leads the church in an all-encompassing lifestyle of worship.

Part of the disconnect that has led to the prominence of rock star worship syndrome



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in the church is that people have failed to understand this all-of-life nature of worship. They want to compartmentalize worship to the seventy-five minutes on Sunday morning.

If Sunday morning songs are the church's only worship experience all week, there is no wonder that we have placed such a hard emphasis on having the best, most musically gifted song leader. But such a focus on music and the music leader is often at the detriment to the myriad other aspects of worship, both personal and corporate.

Songs are only a piece of corporate worship, but true worship leaders effectively use those songs in concert with a lifestyle of worship, as tools to accomplish Christ's pastoral purposes in the lives of the people they are leading.

So if a worship leader is not just a song leader or music director, then what is he or she? That's what I want to communicate with this book. In fact, at one point it was suggested that I not call this book "Worship Leaders, We're Not Rock Stars," but rather "What Is a Worship Leader?"

The latter just didn't quite have the same ring to it. In fact, it sounded quite boring to me, as I'm sure you'll agree, because you probably wouldn't be reading this book right now if I had called it something as boring as all that. Yet that is the very question I want to answer in the coming pages. If we're not rock stars—and we've pretty much agreed that's not us—then what are we?

In some way, I hope to equip you with a higher sense of calling and ambition for great, lasting impact gospel ministry to the church. I hope to instill a sense of the gravity of our responsibility and the greatness of our privilege.

Over the next few chapters, I will break down the role of worship leaders within the church—their identity, responsibilities,

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■ rock stars, then
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privileges, and challenges. Just to give you a preview of where we are going, here are my points:

- *We are the redeemed and adopted.* Until we know that our identity in Christ is far better than any identity that we could try to attain through the applause of man, we will constantly be jockeying for positions of prominence. Our greatest identity is not in being a worship leader, how many songs we write, how big our church is, or even radio play. Our greatest identity is in being children of God who are created in His image, redeemed by His blood, indwelt by His Spirit, adopted into His family, given an eternal inheritance, sent out on His mission, while we are being sanctified and increasingly formed into His image as we prepare for our eternal home with Him. Everything else pales in comparison.
- *We are worshipers.* This seems a bit like a no-brainer, but we are created to worship, and we are all always worshiping something or someone. Because of our fallen state, our hearts are prone to replace the perfect Giver with His good gifts—including the gifts of ministry, spiritual influence, and affirmation. These gifts are all good, but they are not the goal. Remember, true worshipers of God don't primarily worship Him publicly on stage or in the pews of churches. They pursue God in secret—in all of life for the holy goal of knowing Him, being known by Him, and making Him known.
- *We are pastors and deacons.* We are not primarily musicians or song singers. God has given us the great privilege and responsibility of teaching, shepherding, and caring for His people. He has set the qualifications bar high for anyone who would serve His church in this way. These are not merely suggestions, but a standard set for us in the Bible, which He has given us that we might know Him and make Him known.

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- *We are theologians.* Worship leaders are teachers of doctrine in the worship service. Every song is teaching something to the people who are singing it, whether it is rich in doctrinal truth or riddled with heresy. It is the job of the worship leader to be diligent in guarding the doctrines that are taught in the songs he or she leads.
- *We are storytellers (liturgists).* Worship leaders do not simply write out set lists. They should carefully and skillfully craft the order of worship to best shape the gospel for the people they are leading. We craft the liturgy, or order of the worship service, to tell the story in fresh, full ways each week. As liturgists, we consider how each element in the order of worship plays a vital part in doing that. From the call to worship, to adoration to confession and assurance, to songs of mission and sending, each portion of the service has a purpose that worship leaders should know and wield with efficiency and excellence to propel forward the wonderful story of God's greatness and our worth in Him alone.
- *We are evangelists.* The role of the worship leader is, by nature, an evangelistic role. Each week, the content of our songs and the order in which we do them, as well as our prayers, Scripture readings, and more should be masterfully selected to present the gospel of Jesus Christ in a compelling way to those whom the Spirit is drawing. Additionally, as followers of Christ who have been filled with and empowered by the Spirit of God, we are to go outside the walls of the church and make loud the good news of who Christ is and what He has done.
- *We are artists.* We are created in the image of the ultimate Artist to be artistic, as He is. Because of the nature of music in worship, there is a creativity that we must explore. However, while creativity is a wonderful servant to worship, it is a terrible master. Worship leaders ought to always diligently strive to

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maintain the tension of creative artistic expression and helpful practices for maximum corporate engagement.

- *We are Christians.* The life of a worship leader is the life of a normal, average, run-of-the-mill Christian. We are not special and unique snowflakes. We are not exempt from living as disciples or making disciples. We are living sacrifices, whose lives should overflow with the fruit of righteousness that comes from walking in obedience by faith. Like all Christians, we should be consumed with an unceasing passion for the supremacy of the name and glory of Jesus Christ in all we say and do.

To help us better understand our various roles and ministries as leaders of worship, this chapter and others that follow will end with “Questions for Leaders.” These questions are ideal for personal study or as a group activity—consider having your entire worship team meeting weekly to discuss and apply these concepts. It could change your group—and their worship.

As we explore our roles together in the coming pages, I pray that God will give both you and me an intense gratitude for His rescuing us from being dead in our sins and raising us to life for this work—a work that He had planned for us before He created the foundations of the world (Ephesians 1:3–5; 2:10). That He would give us a sober mind to not think too highly of our position or too lowly of our position, but to think rightly about our position and to rise to its demands with humble, gentle, and faithful servants’ hearts. May nothing short of our faithfulness to the Spirit’s work in and through us be the measure of our success. And may we be content with that.

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QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

1. What comes to mind when you think of what it means to be a worship leader?
2. What lies have you been believing about what success looks like for a worship leader?
3. What statement in this chapter surprised you? Why? Do you agree with it now?

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