

LEADING WORSHIP

Welcome

Thanks for downloading the Speaker Notes for the Worship Central Course.

In this third session, we've outlined the structure and key points for the talk, and left room for you to add your own examples. Feel free to personalize the examples and make it your own, but we'd please ask that you keep the core material the same, as we want people to be able to get the same Course wherever they are.

We pray this course will be a great blessing to you and your worship team, and we stand with you as you seek to encounter God, equip the worshipper and empower your local church.

Tim Hughes & Al Gordon

Introduction

Start with a personal humorous story of when you first led worship and it went horribly wrong. For example, Al tells the story of when he was giving his best, lost in wonder love and praise, perhaps a little out of tune but full of passion and power. After a while he noticed that his fellow worshippers were taking it in turns to leave the room. 'Must be the presence of the Lord,' he thought. 'God must be moving so powerfully that they need to step out of the Glory to gather their thoughts and catch their breath.' Years later, he discovered the truth. Yes, they were trying to pull themselves together, but only because Al's singing and playing were so dire. They were taking it in turns to leave the room, collapse in hysterics, compose themselves and come back in, allowing some other poor soul to take a rest from the musical onslaught.

Let's turn together to 1 Peter 2:9:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Leading others in worship can be a challenging responsibility: standing in front of a group of people, wearing our hearts on our sleeves, making ourselves vulnerable is not an easy job. It takes time, patience, practice and a lot of prayer to move on from the kind of tricky first experience so many of us share.

But whether we've had a bumpy start or not, if we are involved in the worship life of this local church we are worship leaders. If we're leading, singing, playing an instrument, serving upfront or involved behind the scenes, then we will be helping lead people into the presence of Jesus by what we do.

Forget the idea that it's only the person up the front who is the worship leader: all of us who are involved need to have a sense of ownership, commitment and responsibility towards what we do, and all of us must see it as a holy and serious calling. That's what 1 Peter reminds us, that we are all a 'royal priesthood' everyone who is a Christian has been 'set apart' in Christ to help each other do something completely remarkable and life-changing - to articulate the praises of God's beloved people whom he has brought 'out of darkness' and 'into his wonderful light'.

That's quite a privilege, isn't it? And quite a responsibility. So how do we do it? How can we grow to become the kind of worship leaders that bring glory to God and serve the people we're called to lead well? We're going to look at three practical questions that apply regardless of our context, model or style of service. These questions apply to us all, and taken together, they will help us all grow and develop as worship leaders.

1 How Are We Preparing

There's something that unites sporting legends, astounding singers and brilliant performers of all styles: the more effortless they appear, the greater the amount of work and preparation it represents. And so it is with leading worship. If we want to be effective we need to work hard behind the scenes, preparing ourselves for that moment when we lead God's people in worship. So whenever we lead worship we need to ask ourselves, how are we preparing both spiritually and practically?

When we think about preparation, there are two extremes to avoid. Firstly we've got to avoid making it all about the music and the visuals. To spend hours tweaking and testing only to finally get round to praying just minutes before the service starts... that's just not going to

work. Without realizing it, we develop a culture within a team where people rely primarily on their own strengths and gifts rather than on God.

The other extreme to avoid is for a worship team not to rehearse at all but to rely solely on prayer. They gather to pray before the service, thinking that they don't need to prepare practically. The team may have an impressive depth of spirituality and passion, but as they lead, if the musicians play out of tune, out of time, making frequent mistakes, a congregation will struggle to engage in worship. As worship leaders we need to value both spiritual and practical preparation.

To lead worship is to take our private cry before God and to make it public. Imagine what the impact on the local church would be if every worship team spent time before every session, seeking God passionately in prayer and private worship, as well as in musical and practical preparation? The influence on the worshipping life of the church would be amazing, wouldn't it?

As leaders of worship one of the greatest gifts we can give to our churches is that of being spiritually alive and fresh. There are no shortcuts to developing authentic spirituality. It comes down to the important and obvious disciplines such as reading God's word, spending time in his presence and a dedication to seek him through prayer. If we have no private cry, then how can we stand in front of others pretending that we do?

We live in a culture of quick fixes and instant results and it can be tempting to apply these same principles to preparing a time of worship. We look for short cuts and ways of speeding up the process. In a recent issue of a worship magazine there was an advertisement for a new resource that said this:

“Worship planning takes time. Sometimes that time is short.

Twelve complete worship sets with little-to-no preparation needed.”

I’m sure the people that made this resource were well meaning and felt like they were responding to a practical need. But there is a danger in relying on delivering a formula, rather than seeking God, and engaging the heart and passion of the musicians and worshippers in your church. The practical considerations for leading corporate worship are vast. Whether it’s choosing the songs, the musical arrangements, organizing technical production or the resources and rehearsals required - it all adds up to a lot of work. Even so, short cuts can leave everyone shortchanged.

Choosing Songs

How do you pick songs in a way that helps people to respond to God in a worshipful and meaningful way? There’s more to it than throwing together the five most popular songs of the week.

First, find a theme. A theme can bring a focus and direction to a time of worship. A few songs clustered around a particular theme provide a cutting edge to our worship. Too often our selection of songs meander, rather than taking people on a journey. As you pull together your set-lists ask yourself whether there is a clear theme being developed throughout the lyrics of the songs; themes such as God’s sovereignty, his mercy, his faithfulness, his creation, or his heart of justice. Let’s not just jump randomly from one song to another.

Second, balance substance with simplicity. We are called to worship God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It is essential to have songs that inspire and stretch our minds in

worship, songs that are rich in content. The great hymns are an amazing gift in unpacking and poetically communicating the character of God. But our worship is not merely cerebral. Part of our role is to engage people's hearts and emotions. If our songs are so dense with words, requiring a doctorate in theology just to be able to sing them, then this connection becomes very difficult. Paul talks about this to the church in Corinth saying, "I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind." (1 Corinthians 14:15)

Third, keep it fresh. Introducing new songs can help here - so be on the look out for new material and think through how you can flow these new songs within your more familiar repertoire. How many new songs should you introduce? There's no set answer to this, it's dependent on the congregation you lead, the musicians you use and the season your church is in. One or two new songs a month can work, but you have to be careful when you do start to bring in something fresh. Use a new song regularly over the first couple of months and remember that a congregation often needs to hear and sing a song three or four times before being comfortable with it.

The truth is that some people get really easily bored in times of sung worship, so be on your toes. Fresh doesn't have to mean new: singing an old hymn or song that hasn't been used for a while can be just as powerful. Find new and interesting arrangements and embrace the best of old hymns and contemporary songs.

Fourth, think about who we're leading. The context will have an impact on what songs we choose, the style of service or the equipment we use. Obviously weddings have different requirements to youth celebrations and if you're leading when the service is focussing on issues of poverty, suffering and injustice, it's probably a good idea not to start with Happy Day.

Some songs work brilliantly with a great band and excellent sound system but don't always work so well with ten people in someone's living room and a slightly out of tune, beat up guitar. In these small gatherings people understandably feel more vulnerable and exposed during worship. Our role as worship leaders is to enable people to feel secure and free to bring an offering of worship. If they spend the evening terrified that their voice may crack or that people will laugh at their out of tune voice, then they will not engage in worship.

Songs of celebration and praise are often in higher musical keys. With a big sound and many voices people are confident to sing loudly and reach for the high notes, so these work well in large groups. But in small groups this would be more challenging. So consider choosing simpler songs – particularly ones that are easy to sing and memorize - as they work well in small group settings. Or drop the key by a tone - or more - to help people along.

2 What Is God doing?

As well as all that preparation we have to be constantly asking ourselves this vital question. At every moment, on every occasion, in every context, during every time of worship we lead, we need to be asking God what he's doing, where he's leading and how we should respond. We should never just assume or switch off. God has a plan and a purpose for our gathered meetings that he is keen to share with us. Our role is to tune into this and obediently follow.

There are only three types of worship: badly led worship, good solid worship and Spirit-led worship. In badly led worship, basic mistakes are made, songs are sung out of tune, the choice of songs seem unimaginative and random. People are distracted by the glaring mistakes and it is hard for people to enter in.

When worship is led in a good and solid way, the basics are done well. The band is led effectively, the songs are well thought through and the congregation is enabled to bring their sacrifice of praise. For many of us this is where we settle. But there is so much more.

Spirit-led worship is less to do with style, tradition or quality, but rather where there is a deep and dynamic exchange between the Holy Spirit and the congregation. It is here that we see breakthrough, where we see lives changed, vision birthed and passion fueled.

But you can't make it happen by simply reading a book or taking a course. It takes time, you have to wait in God's presence and practice the art of listening to the leading of the Spirit, allowing him to fill us with power and love, even as we lead worship. It also involves us allowing space in our worship for God's Spirit to move, to not hold the reins so tightly as we try to drive our agenda through. To grow in Spirit-led worship we must allow space.

With all the pressures of playing with a band, remembering chords and words, watching and observing a congregation's response in worship we can forget to ask 'what is God doing?' But it's often when asking this question that a thought comes to mind. Sometimes it's a different song; sometimes it's a line to sing out, perhaps it's an encouragement to worship in silence. It's as we step out in this that we learn and grow and begin to see God at work.

In discerning what God is doing we need to tread the balance between being pastors and prophets. We need the prophetic to move people on in worship. We need to take risks, allowing space and time for God to take control. However if the prophetic is unchecked we can leave people confused and fearful. Accountability is also important. We need to have people around us who can help us learn and grow – what worked, what didn't? What was of God, what was of the flesh? We must not be afraid of making mistakes, as we're all learning all the time. Without mistakes, we can't learn.

At the same time the pastoral without the prophetic can result in a church stagnating. That's why we need to hold in tension both the pastoral and prophetic. We want to see churches moving forward in worship, whilst at the same time taking as many people along with them as possible.

Lead Worship not just Songs

If we want to be led by the Spirit then we can't just be the kind of person who selects the songs, rehearses the exact arrangements and has the worship all tied up before the congregation has even gathered, never swerving from the set list no matter what goes on. Worship is so much more than this - it is an encounter with the Lord of heaven; it is a heartfelt response to his initiating love. We can't simply close our eyes, turn up our monitors and forget that there is a group of people that we are meant to be leading.

So, obviously we need to be able to see the people who we are leading, watching out for signs of how and when they are responding or not responding, when they seem to engage or disengage. As worship leaders, we need to have one eye on the Lord, and one eye on the people. As we lead worship we need to regularly open our eyes to see what is happening around us. We can still worship with our eyes open. It doesn't kill the holy moment. Presumably at Pentecost someone had their eyes open to see and record where God moved in great power and when people were responding. There are various opinions on whether worship teams should be standing on a stage. The point of placing a worship team at the front on a stage is not so that they can be seen, but rather that they can see the congregation.

During a time of leading worship it's helpful to note some simple observations on how people are entering in. How are people responding in terms of the level of singing and involvement? If you look out to a sea of blank expressions and it seems that the congregation has no pulse whatsoever, then we need to ask ourselves some questions. Are we singing too many new, unfamiliar songs? Are we relying on the same songs we've used for the last month, are people just bored? Is the band too loud, drowning people out? Is the band too quiet, making people feel self-conscious and awkward?

When things get really tough, it's often helpful to find a familiar song that you know really works for your church. If people are still disengaged after singing this then take time to think and pray afterwards. It might be the church is going through a dry season. Perhaps the people need to be encouraged and affirmed.

Worship is both caught and taught. If we really believe that worship is our highest calling and therefore our first priority, then we need to be continually teaching our congregations on the subject of worship, what it is and how we can respond in both a private and corporate setting. We need to model worship if people are going to catch a vision for it, and we need to teach into it. This is where the relationship between the worship leader and the senior church leader is so important. Having times together to discuss the spiritual climate of the church is a key aspect of team leadership.

[Insert Illustration]

Tim shares this story: 'I remember leading a particular congregation regularly in worship where the response always seemed minimal. Every time I'd leave the stage after leading worship I'd feel frustrated and angry. During the sermon I'd be quietly fuming and complaining to God. On one such Sunday where things had been particularly tough I started

moaning to God. My assumption was that he too must feel angry and disappointed with the congregations response. In the midst of my angst and gripes God challenged me saying, "Tim I love these people and I want you to love them too." I felt convicted and from that day on would pray, "God give me compassion for these people. Help me to love them." Over weeks and months, something shifted in my heart and I'm sure the congregation began to notice. Rather than leading aggressively when people were slow to respond, I began to lead with a sensitivity and grace which was God given. As I led with a new sense of love, the congregation began to respond with fresh passion and vigour.'

If you have a similar story share it now, or tell them about Tim's experience.

When we feel discouraged by the apparent apathy or disconnect of a congregation, it can be easy to start leading out of frustration. But we are called to feed the sheep, not beat the sheep. We need to pray that God would give us his grace to keep loving and serving.

We also need to avoid distractions: odd mannerisms, words spoken out of place, strange sounds, long pointless gaps that result in people disengaging and exiting a time of worship. Without realizing it we can develop habits that actually distract people. It's worth being aware of these. Maybe it's a funny wiggle as we sing or lots of unnecessary ad-libs we feel obliged to include.

3 Where Are We Growing?

As everyone knows, even superheroes need to recharge. Batman has the Bat Cave the Thunderbirds retreat to Tracy Island. How do you recharge? Each time we lead worship we're giving out, physically, emotionally and spiritually. That is why it is so important for us to regularly recharge. It's when we fail to take time being replenished that we'll find ourselves sinking spiritually often making errors of judgment and poor life choices.

Spiritually, nothing brings more refreshment than time in Jesus' presence. In Mark's gospel we see the twelve disciples return from being sent out to preach the good news and pray for the sick and oppressed. As they gather round Jesus, exhausted by their travels and ministry, many other people join them, perhaps hoping to be prayed for, to hear more of their teaching. The disciples were so pressed by the crowds of people that they didn't even have time to eat. Into the stress and chaos Jesus takes charge saying to the twelve, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." (Mark 6:31)

For some of us we need to heed Jesus' words, getting time out to rest in his presence, learning the art of remaining and abiding in Christ. It's deeply practical advice. For this reason, praying together as a team before and after the services is key. This is a great way to thank God for all that he's done; it's a helpful reminder that ultimately our worship is all about him. But it's also an opportunity to pray for ourselves, to ask that God would pour into us after we've been giving out. This time of prayer is so timely and important.

Everyone is different. You may find after leading worship the best thing you can do is get some space on your own to relax. For others being left alone means disaster. Many people confide in us that after leading worship they feel terrible – discouraged, depressed and insecure. It's often in the moments after we've led worship that the enemy will try to trip us up or knock us down.

We are in a spiritual battle and worship is on the frontline. We mustn't underestimate the powerful dynamic that occurs when God's people gather to proclaim in one voice, 'Jesus is Lord.' There is great power in the name of Jesus. He is the risen, unstoppable, all-conquering King. But, nevertheless, Scripture tells us that Satan will do everything in his power to knock

us off course. 1 Peter 5:8 warns us, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

The good news is that the one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world. God has equipped us in every way to deal with the temptations that come along. Practically, for some the best thing we can do after leading worship is arrange to meet up with friends. You’ll find what works for you, and if your team is strong then so much the better.

Rick Warren speaks of a rhythm of ministry that allows space to recharge. He encourages people to divert daily, withdraw weekly and abandon annually. Divert daily means finding time to switch off from work – go for a run, enjoy a good meal, watch a film, read the newspaper. By allowing a period of rest each day, we keep awake and alert to serve God. Withdraw weekly means taking a period of time off, perhaps a couple of days, a few afternoons or whatever works for you. In this time maybe turn the phone off, spend a day with great friends, do something fun – relax. Finally abandon annually connects with the truth that we all benefit from a good holiday every year. It’s often during these times away that the busyness of life settles and we get fresh perspective, and that God speaks clearly about future direction.

As we gain experience and reach a level where we are quite comfortable leading worship, there is a danger that we stop reflecting on what we’re involved in. But one of the exciting aspects of leading worship is that there are always ways we can grow and develop; there is always more to learn and to challenge us. We are always asking our team what we can do better, what worked and what didn’t. And we know we need to be ready for the answer - we need to embrace constructive criticism, because only then will we grow.

It's essential we never lose a hunger to be the best we can be. Part of this involves inviting your senior leaders to point out areas that can be strengthened in your worship leading. For some of us this process can be hard. We may find it difficult not to take things personally. We might miss all the encouragements and focus on the one negative. Some of us have served in churches where we were unfairly and harshly criticized. We may have been stung by the pain of harsh words spoken over us. People can be cruel with their words and actions.

The truth is that we will always face criticism, some helpful, some just abusive and destructive. If it's constructive, then there will be things we can learn and embrace. If it's harsh then we need to learn to handle it well. There are two positive ways of approaching this. Firstly we can try to find the kernel of truth in the criticism. Even if the comment was meant to harm but as you reflect on it you can see a small element of truth that you can then work on.

If there is no truth whatsoever in someone's criticism and it is simply vindictive and spiteful, well, Jesus promises to bless us: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12 TNIV)

Great leaders keep on going despite setbacks and discouragements. Remember Winston Churchill's definition of success is "the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm."

We need to build a team of worshippers who encourage one another, who spur each other on to grow, develop and thrive.

As we close, Paul writes this:

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12:10-12)

Pray

Heavenly Father, we pray you would equip us as worship leaders, that you would help equip us as worship leaders right now. We pray that by the Holy Spirit, you would renew our zeal and fervor as we serve the Lord. Come, Lord Jesus.

Next

We'd encourage you to really spend time praying for each other, asking God to equip you as worship leaders. Then break into Groups for the discussion time. The Notes will have the questions already built into them, so follow these to guide your discussions. They can be downloaded from WorshipCentral.org.

Also, we'd love your feedback on the session you've just given, as we're continually in the process of honing and updating this material. You can upload your examples and illustrations on the website.