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Learning to Lead Worship—Forming Worship Leaders in Congregations and Schools

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Learning to Lead Worship—Forming Worship Leaders in Congregations and Schools

Calvin Worship Symposium, January 2014

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity. (Heb. 6:1)

In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness. (Titus 2:7)

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. (Col. 3:16)

I. Initial discussion: Where did you learn *to worship* more deeply? Where have you learned *to lead worship*?

- A. In worship itself?
- B. In formal classes about worship (Sunday school, Christian college, seminary)?
- C. In worship leader training sessions?
- D. (for leaders) In the design and organization of worship ministry—planning materials, organizational templates, job descriptions?
- E. In informal moments in church and home life (as parents, from neighbors, from people in other faith traditions, etc.)?

II. Initial Assumptions and Delimitations. . .

1. While worship is something hard-wired into us as human beings (Rom. 1), worshipping the triune God in spirit and truth is something we learn as Jesus' disciples.
2. The worship ministry of churches consists in giving shape to public worship events, but also to equipping people to participate in these events. This equipping task is secondary and derivative, but also essential. Arguably, churches give a lot more attention to the former task than the latter.
3. Learning to *lead worship* should be deeply integrated with how we *learn to worship*. How we lead will shape how people participate. The kind of participation we have learned will, in turn, shape how we lead.
 - If we learn to lead worship by focusing, for example, on primarily impressive performances (in music, preaching, etc.) we will shape worshipers who focus on impressive performances.
 - If we learn to participate in worship more deeply through, for example, powerful expressive gestures and postures, we are likely to lead worship by featuring those embodied gestures
4. Our focus will be on learning to participate in corporate worship. At the same time, learning about worship is really about learning the entire Christian faith and life. So perhaps we should say that our focus is "*learning to participate deeply in corporate-worship-as-a-focal-point for the-24/7-*

Christian-life.” Being aware of the connections between public worship and daily life will matter for how we teach.

Background: In English “worship” refers to at least three distinct things:

- a) explicit acts of adoration,
- b) a public event in which a congregation engages God (=liturgy), and
- c) and all-of-life orientation that lives to the glory of God.

We need all three. Our focus is on b) with deep concerns for how strengthens a) and c).

5. Our goal is growth and learning in both our desire, our will, our knowledge, and our emotions—thus, we are interested in teaching and learning that includes, but is not limited to cognitive knowledge.
6. Full, conscious, active participation can not be engineered or coerced. We can evoke it and testify about it, but we can’t produce it. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. And this is gospel good news for us as worshipers and leaders, freeing us from the presumption that it all depends on us, and also awakening us to a sense of expectation of what the Holy Spirit may well choose to do in us and through us.

III. What we long to learn and to teach. . .

We all can learn techniques: how to run a sound system, design PowerPoint slides, arrange a worship song for various instruments, learn how to introduce a song. But all of these techniques are best grounded in a deeper vision of worship. Let’s start there.

What are some fundamental, core lessons about worship that you could teach 5-year olds, but also 85-year olds, in worship contexts IN ANY STYLE!?

1. In worship, we tell the story of Jesus, we rehearse and savor God’s acts in history. (*The Worship Architect*, theme 1, pp. 5-8)
2. In worship, we speak with God, listen to God—and thus enact a profound divine-human relationship that thrives with honesty, transparency, and balanced (*The Worship Architect*, themes 2-3, pp. 8-12)
3. In worship, we listen to God as a community, speak to God as a community, and interact with other. Worship is corporate. (*The Worship Architect*, theme 4, pp. 12-13)
4. In worship, we engage a triune God of grace, whose activity in worship precedes, enables, and perfects ours. (*The Worship Architect*, theme 5, pp. 13-15)
5. Worship is both expressive and transformative. It honors our present experience, and stretches us to grow emotionally, cognitively, interpersonally. (*The Worship Architect*, theme 6, pp. 15-17)

A ROADMAP FOR EXPLORATION

	A. In worship	B. In homes, daily life, informal pastoral encounters	C. In formal education, training	C. In retreat, workshop, beginning of the year training sessions	D. In organizing worship ministries (key template documents)
1. (RE)-TELL GOD'S STORY	To discuss	To discuss	Constance Cherry's classroom presentation	*WA: Collect prayers using Bible stories (include article, "Sunday School Lessons in Prayer") or short teaching on Christian year	*WA: <i>Seeking God's Face</i> for Thursday chapels & Adapting Christian year for the academic calendar.
2. DIALOG, COVENANT	To discuss	To discuss	Constance Cherry's classroom presentation	*WA: (1) arrows exercise w/ LOFT service, (2) analysis of worship texts	*WA: (1) song-diet grid, (2) worship planning template & worksheet
3. CORPORATE	To discuss	To discuss	Constance Cherry's classroom presentation	*WA: Worship is for <i>Whole</i> Community, Ex. 1	*Worship participant stats (faculty, staff, students, persons of color)
4. TRINITARIAN	To discuss	To discuss	Constance Cherry's classroom presentation	*WA: Worship is Trinitarian, Ex. 1 (include article, "Worship Verbs")	*Regular worship review question in planning meetings
5. TRANSFORMATIVE	To discuss	To discuss	Constance Cherry's classroom presentation	*WA: Two articles, "A Significant Song" & "Summer Memories"	*WA: river illustration & song-diet grid

ADDITIONAL NOTES

1. One key goal is participation in worship that is “iconic” in which we not merely “look at” but “look through” a given reality. How can we connect the mechanics, style, form of worship with its purpose or essence? Teaching about worship cannot focus on just mechanics, style, or form. BUT it can’t focus just on the essence of worship, either. That would be to spiritualize worship. The goal is helping people see connections between mechanics, form, and style and essence, and encounter with God. One of the tests for effective teaching is how many boundary crossings there are between principles and practices.
2. How can we encourage a rhetoric of wisdom, gratitude, doxology, and testimony? The tone of how we teach and learn matters a lot.
3. How can we help people experience worship formatively (expecting to be stretched by God’s Spirit), while not reducing worship to a means to another end?
4. How can we encourage people to participate not just individually, but corporately, viewing corporate worship as more than the sum of the individuals?
5. We need to pay attention to common experiences that really are key to worship, but that often we don’t pause to name: a) the challenge of meaning words that someone else speaks (in public prayer or song), b) the joy of simply seeing other people at worship of all kinds and types and savoring their presence (e.g., at the Lord’s Supper), and c) the poignancy of our “wandering minds and thoughts” (during a sermon) and the ways this can be a source of learning, encouragement, growth, “the inner experience of the application of the text” or “a means by which God can work not only through what happens, but around and in spite of what happens).
6. So much of worship is pre-cognitive, operating at the level of imagination (James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*). We learn by simply “absorbing.” So much of worship is “caught” not “taught.” Further, as we teach, we send out a thousand signals—more than we can ever control—about how worship relates to intellect, imagination, emotion, race, gender, socio-economic class, how we view the Bible, etc.
7. In many areas of life, meaning emerges when language is added to practice. In baseball, it’s the experience, plus the language about it. In music, it’s the experience, plus the language about it. In film, it is the interaction of video + audio, plus the language about it (cf Nicholas Cook on Multi-Media Music).
8. Teaching worship is not just about teaching people what to do or what to give, but also what and how to receive, how to wait. It is a bit like a swimming teacher teaching people how to float (Craig Dykstra on pastoral intelligence).
9. Teaching worship is always provisional and incomplete, and often indirect. Worship is not something we “master,” even if we spend our lifetime on it.
10. Habits, scales, and drills matter. Basketball players do passing drills. Violinist play scales. What are the scales or drills for effective worship leaders or worshipers?
 - Study several on-line news sources and develop a list of 5 key topics for public intercession. [training wide-ranging intercession]
 - Come to a collaborative worship planning session with a list of songs that you think *other people* might choose for a given service. [training empathetic collaborators]
 - Asking after worship every week, “what aspect of God’s beauty and glory was clear today?,” “whose presence today in worship was a special blessing?”
11. What are some dangers in our teaching of worship?
 - That we will overly spiritualize worship, and not connect it to ordinary life,
 - That we will focus only on matters of form or style and not connect them to a large vision of God,
 - That we will overly intellectualize worship,
 - That we will suggest we have the only ‘right’ way to worship
 - That our teaching will distort some part of the gospel
 - That we become teachers only and not learners