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Top Ten Challenges Facing Worship Leaders in 2014

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FROM 2003

WORSHIP LEADERSHIP – the art of worshiping God in the presence of God’s people in such a way that others are prompted to overcome their personal preoccupations and distractions and, through the power and prompting of the Holy Spirit, offer their prayer and praise as well. In order to design and lead authentic worship, the worship leader must:

- Discover what is “Good News” for the congregation, and the ways in which the Good News is most clearly heard;
- Discover the authentic “voice” of the congregation’s praise and nurture it;
- Discover the source of the congregation’s most profound joy and return there frequently;
- Determine the lesser gods competing for the congregation’s attention to present a compelling case for the Triune God.

The ten challenges we identified were these:

10. **Worship Style**

- Traditional / Non-traditional
- Formal / Informal
- Choir / Praise Team
- Printed Order / Spirit Led

9. **Five Distinct Generations Worshiping Together**

- G.I. Generation, 1900-1924, (mostly deceased)
- Silent Generation, 1925-1945
- Boomer Generation, 1946-1964
- Generation X, 1965-1985
- Generation Y or Millennials, 1986-2000, (many disenchanted)
- (Generation Z, a.k.a. iGeneration, GenWii, GenNext)

8. **Cultural Expectations**

- The “keepers of the way things ought to be”
- Ghosts of Christendom looking for a familiar place to haunt
- Permutations in secular culture

7. **Competing “religions”**

- The plethora of “religious” options
- Confronting secular expectations and demands
- Trivialization of the Gospel

6. **The Demise of Musical Training & Group Singing**

- The departure of music from public education and adult avocation
- Wide-spread musical illiteracy
- The embarrassment of group singing within an a-musical culture

- The surrender of pop culture to the lowest common denominator
- The tyranny of “studio” perfection

5. **The Loss of a Poetic Voice & Imagination**

- Cultural predisposition toward math, technology, and science
- Decline of the serious arts and classics in popular media
- Marginalizing of the liberal arts in education

4. **Loss of Corporate Memory**

- Disappearance of Christian “lore” in society
- Triumph of a-theological architecture in the church
- Diminished understanding of symbolism
- Virtual death of the oral tradition

3. **Loss of Biblical Identity**

- Distance (or disengagement) from active participation in the biblical narrative

2. **Loss of Biblical Literacy**

- Common texts and stories no longer memorized
- Epic stories and Bible “heroes” are unknown (though cultural reference is still widespread)
- Biblical characters / situations / images are beyond the knowledge of most “believers”

1. **Embarrassment of the Gospel**

- Confusion and conflict over biblical authority
- Self-consciousness in a pluralistic / egalitarian culture
- The Pilate Syndrome: “What is truth?”

FAST-FORWARD TEN YEARS...

WORSHIP **LEADERSHIP** – Ten years ago, many gifted worship leaders were frustrated with the response of their congregations. Now, more and more pastors and worshipping congregations are frustrated with their worship leaders. I believe there are three non-negotiables for anyone wanting to lead followers of Jesus in worship. We must have:

1. **conviction** that worship of the Triune God is worthy of our best efforts and undivided attention,
2. **compassion** for God's people that compels us to challenge and inspire growth in their personal faith and their participation in the worshipping community, and
3. **commitment** to take a long-view of challenges and opportunities; actively leading people to a deeper experience of discipleship and joy.

As the role of the church changes in the culture, the role of worship must change in the church. Preparation for worship leaders needs to include dimensions of the spirit – consciously remembering for whom we do what we do; the mind – determining and evaluating why we do what we do; and the body – evaluating and improving how we do what we do.

TOP TEN CHALLENGES (2014)

1. Nurturing the Joy of Leading

Authentic Christian worship, like the Word of God on which it is centered, is living, breathing, changing, vibrant, vital, refreshingly unpredictable, and always transformative. The blessing of worship, the life-changing experience of encountering and praising the Father, Son and Spirit, is available to disciples of Jesus every time we gather. This blessing is not dependent on our resources, the beauty of our location, the approval of our culture, or any other temporal circumstance. It is a gift from God.¹

2. Understanding Our Own Preferences

It is necessary to be aware of our own personal affinities—what we as a pastor or worship leader like or dislike in our own experience of worship. The goal should be to play to our own strengths without privileging ourselves over our congregation. On the one hand, far too many ministers [and worship leaders] create worship services that delight their own hearts but do not connect at all to people who are less theologically and culturally trained.... At the same time, we can't lead a worship service well in a style that leaves our own hearts cold. Once we are willing to admit that our preferences and tastes are just that, we are still faced with the fact that we can't lead worship unless we are actually engaged in it ourselves.²

¹ Emily Brink and Paul Detterman, *Wise Church: Exploring Faith and Worship with Christians Around the World* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2013), 22.

² Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2012), 301.

3. Looking Beyond the God “I Want”

Left to myself, the God I want is a god who will give me what I want. He – or more likely *it* – will be a projection of my own desires. At the grosser level, this will lead me to one of the more obvious pagan gods or goddesses, who offer their devotees money, sex, or power (as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche pointed out). All idols started out life as a god somebody wanted.... Nobody falls down on their face before the god they wanted. Nobody trembles at the word of a home-made god. Nobody goes out with fire in their belly to heal the sick, to clothe the naked, to teach the ignorant, to feed the hungry because of a god they wanted. They are more likely to stay at home with their feet up.³

4. Accepting God’s Invitation

Christian worship is an intentionally decentering practice, calling us out of ourselves into the very life of God. That worship begins with a *call* is already a first displacement that is at the same time an invitation: to find ourselves *in* Christ.... In a society of mutual display and debilitating self-consciousness, it is a special grace to be invited into a Story where we are *hidden* with Christ in God. And being found in him, we are called out of ourselves to love neighbors and enemies, widows and orphans. In the performed story that is Christian worship, we are related to others as neighbors rather than as an “audience.”⁴

5. Embracing the Uniqueness

True worship, then, will be odd and perhaps even weird to the watching world. Its oddness is not lamentable, but perhaps even essential to the church’s faithfulness and witness. For if the gospel is foolishness, it is foolish only to those who do not believe.... For this reason, the church must be unapologetic in her worship. She must not cater to those bound to ridicule her ways as foolish. Christian worship is, in fact, a bold political act. It subverts the world’s values by assigning glory and praise to the One whom the world despises. And as weak as the church at worship might appear to the watching world, the truth is that the powers of this world are no match for the power of God who is present among his people when they gather to sing praise, pray, and hear his Word.⁵

6. Enriching the Experience

“Sing a new Song” is an exciting permission for us. The gospel is not limited to any generation, to any tribe or nation or tongue. In every age, in every place, the Spirit of Christ comes to offer salvation.... Whatever our worship style or tradition, the flow of words in a given service gathers up both old words and new words—the balance varies, but both are always present. We read the Scriptures aloud. We use words from other times and places, perhaps in a traditional liturgy, perhaps in a song or prayer from the last generation, from another continent, or from composer in the next town. The rest of the words in a service are, shall we say, locally grown. How wonderful, as God welcomes our praises and petitions in every language, even the unspoken language of the heart.⁶

³ N. T. Wright, *For All God’s Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997), 22-23

⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 149-50.

⁵ D. G. Hart and John Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 34.

⁶ Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 190.

7. Re-Telling the Story

At the end of the day, worship has a single role to play in the lives of believers: to retell, re-present, and thus refresh the story of God's love and call... Everything in worship is subordinated to this end and leads to this goal. Similarly, everything we do in worship, our prayers, and our response in faith and devotion has a single goal: to allow us to indwell this story and make it our own. In other words, these [worship] practices are effective when they encourage and sustain the relationships with God, creation, and each other that the Gospel makes possible. Likewise, we, nourished and renewed by the narrative of worship, have a single calling: to tell and live this great story, to remind ourselves and those around us again and again that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.⁷

8. Looking Out the Windows

If God's primary desire was for a church with full seats and overflowing activities, we would focus time, effort, and resources on making our congregation more attractive and appealing than any of the neighboring churches. But scripture reveals that God's singular desire is the redemption of the world, and that Christ has commissioned the Church to continue his work on earth, in the power of the Holy Spirit. To the extent that we realize this, our time, efforts, and resources will be focused on nurturing disciples of Jesus who *expect* to actively participate in God's mission, and who will fully engage in the life of the worshiping community to prepare for that sending.⁸

9. Connecting Worship with Life

The Bible teaches that the people of the world, whether they believe it or not, suffer and die while waiting for us in the church to live like the people of God, demonstrating our worship with our lives (Romans 8:18-25). The heart of the battle over worship is this: our worship practices are separated from our call to justice and, worse, foster the self-indulgent tendencies of our culture rather than nurturing the self-sacrificing life of the Kingdom of God.⁹

10. Becoming a "Lead Worshiper"

"Worship leaders" ...may assume a position of authority in the eyes of the worshiping community and read or play what they have prepared (or what has been prepared for them), with the goal of moving the congregation through their part of the "agenda" of the worship service. "Lead worshipers," on the other hand, ...are called first of all to be worshipers, joining their gifts with everyone else in a common offering of praise. They prepare the worshiping community to encounter the triune God, creating the expectation of interaction, conversation, and response to God, and then stepping back into the community to share in that encounter.... Training lead worshipers requires a substantial investment of time, effort, vision, and passion. It is its own form of discipleship.¹⁰

⁷ William Dyrness, *A Primer on Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 116.

⁸ Brink and Detterman, *Wise Church*, 104.

⁹ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 22-23.

¹⁰ Brink and Detterman, *Wise Church*, 38.