

PSALMS AND SONGS

A Theology of Worship Leading

By Holland Davis

Special to ASSIST News Service

[CBN.com](#) – **SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO, CA (ANS)** -- Have you ever asked the question where do worship leaders fit in the Bible? Are they the same as Old Testament Levites? Do we have a Biblical model for worship leading? These are difficult questions, especially in light of the fact that the way we do church is really a modern cultural invention. Where do you find Sunday school in the Bible? The modern American church owes much of its methodology to the revivalists of the Great Awakenings. Charles and John Wesley modeled the pastor and worship leader connection as they married the word and worship through their meetings.

THE OFFICE OF WORSHIP LEADER?

One of the struggles I've had as a worship leader has been over the issue of the legitimacy of worship leading as an office or gift. I've been told that God had called me to be a worship leader, but it's not listed with pastor, teacher, apostle, evangelist, prophet. I've been told that I have a gift of worship leading, but it's not listed with the other spiritual gifts. So where do I fit?

I want to submit a theological paradigm that I believe provides a Biblical context for the office and function of a worship leader. Ephesians 4:11 tells us, "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers..." I don't think that it is an accident that worship leader is not listed. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:1, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant." He goes on to write "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all" (1 Corinthians 12:4 – 7).

There are three words mentioned as it relates to how the gifts of the Spirit function in the church. They are diversities, differences and activities. The original language translates these words distribution, implementation and effect. In other words, all the gifts are from God but they are distributed to different people and implemented different ways through activities that produce an effect. This is where I find the "gift" of worship leading. A worship leader is a pastor, teacher, prophet, evangelist or apostle who exercises their gifts through facilitating sung prayer. It's not a musical function, but a leadership function. In fact, you can discover the primary leadership function of a worship leader by the songs that they select. Pastors choose songs that emphasize

relationship and healing. Evangelists choose songs that are stylistically relevant with simple and easy to understand language. Apostles are concerned for the nations and mission. Teachers are concerned with doctrinal truth and prophets are concerned about purity and holiness.

THE FUNCTION OF WORSHIP LEADING

Your theology of worship influences your philosophy of ministry as it relates to the function of worship leading. If you view worship as a musical function, then you're concerned about song selection and musicality. If you view worship pragmatically, then you're concerned about setting up the message properly or having a worship ministry that will draw the community. Every pastor has an opinion of how worship should happen, but very few understand the role of a worship leader.

So what is the function of worship leading? Look at the book of Psalms. It is a collection of what I like to call - prayer songs. The prayers of David and others were set to music and incorporated into the worship life of the nation of Israel. They became part of the corporate and private expression of worship to God. Using David's model as a worship leader, I facilitate the corporate expression of prayer from the congregation to God. It is a relationship based ministry where the worship leader is providing language through prayer songs for the congregation to relate to God. Worship songs are prayers set to music and the set list is equivalent to a list of prayer requests.

This has huge implications as it relates to how I perform my function as a worship leader. It means that I need to have my own private life of prayer. It also means that I need to be in touch with the work of the Spirit within the community of believers I'm serving. In other words, I can't fake it. My relationship or lack of relationship with God will have a direct influence on my ability to facilitate the corporate sung prayer of the congregation. This is why you can worship with a group of well-rehearsed musicians in a worship service and walk away feeling like you've never met God. In other words, worship is not purely musical, but relational in function.

Incidentally, this is the creative impetus behind writing new songs of worship. All "prayer songs" are given to a local congregation for the purpose of facilitating the corporate prayer life of that community. Sometimes, those "prayer songs" inspire other communities and become part of a regional or national expression. I have never written a song with the intent of getting it recorded or to "get the songs out there." My entire focus is simply to serve the people that show up every week for worship and that includes writing songs that best express the cry that is in their hearts. What happens after that is up to God.

SPONTANEITY IN WORSHIP

If worship is relational, then spontaneity is a natural part of the worship leading

function. Think of a prayer group. Each individual prayer influences the prayers of the group. When you are in the midst of the worship event, the opening prayer of the pastor, the scripture reading, God's leading or the message will all influence the prayer songs that I select. Sometimes this change might happen during the worship service after sound checks, set revisions and power point. Sometimes the only song that fits is a "new" song that is birthed on the spot. That is how "Let It Rise" was written. It was a spontaneous prayer that captured the cry of our hearts at a coffee shop Bible study in Pacific Beach. I always tell my worship teams, we play from the heart not the chart. This requires greater preparation at home on their part. I encourage them to live the songs. I prepare my media team to be ready to go "off the page." This requires them to pay attention and have good tools at their disposal. We've built a culture with the understanding that our worship is responsive and not programmatic.

I started leading worship when I was thirteen. I would sit in my room and play worship songs to the Lord for hours. I would sing what was on my heart. I would sing songs from the Young Life Songbook that I had. I didn't know that God was training me to be a worship leader. I just loved to spend time with God. It wasn't until I was sixteen that I led worship in front of people. Do you get my drift? I encourage worship leaders to sing their prayers during their private devotional time with the Lord. Sing scripture. Develop a natural prayer language of song. That way when you're in a congregational setting, you're simply responding as you do in your private times.

MATCHING FORM TO FUNCTION

So where does style and instrumentation fit into all of this? This is one of the areas of greatest tension with churches. Jesus provides the best solution to this ongoing tension when he says, "And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all" (Mark 10:49). When it comes to style and instrumentation, we need to ask, "Does it best serve the community gathered?" When you bring a full drum kit into a room that holds 50, does it best serve that community gathered to seek God? When you play traditionally arranged choral songs for a young congregation, does it best serve that community expression of prayer? Keep in mind that these dynamics change as a church grows numerically and culturally. What works today, may not work in six months. You might be in a room that is best served with acoustic guitars and djembe. In a year, you might be in a room that can handle a full band. But, if you keep the attitude of a servant and weave that attitude into every aspect of your ministry, then you will go far in diminishing potential problem areas.

I like to give some basic guidelines to pastors and worship leaders on instrumentation. Unless you have an extremely gifted drummer, I wouldn't introduce drums until you're in a room that can hold over two hundred people. Actually, the acoustic approach is a very hip approach right now. Using acoustic guitars, bass, piano and djembe or cajon is a culturally relevant and sonically easy to control instrumentation for music.

Be creative in your use of technology. New products are constantly being developed that expand your instrumentation in ways that are appealing even if you don't have the talent base to produce what you hear in your head. You might want to explore the use of loops or keyboard sequencing. What about using a vocalizer to strengthen backing vocals? The possibilities are only limited by your imagination.

BE WHO GOD MADE YOU TO BE

All ministry is incarnational. What do I mean? The word incarnational comes from the Latin *incarnatio* and corresponds to the Greek *sarkosis*, or *ensarkosis*, which is taken from John 1:14, "And the Word was made flesh". It is God made flesh in Jesus. In Colossians 1:27 Paul writes, "To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Here he introduces the idea that this God made flesh in Jesus now lives in and through every believer. When we say that all ministry is incarnational, we are saying that all ministry is the life of Jesus living through the individual believer. It is Christ in you ministering to those around you.

This is both freeing and terrifying. It is freeing in that so many leaders look at the success of others and try to duplicate them by imitation. We go to conferences trying to learn the latest techniques and kill ourselves trying to implement them. It can be a pressure filled prison of unrealized expectation. Or worse, it can work and we become enamored with our own success thinking promotion comes from my cleverness. I've watched leaders trapped by their self-made success. I've also watched them crumble under the pressure of it.

The truth is that God does not anoint us being someone else. God doesn't anoint me doing someone else's vision. God uniquely gifts and anoints you and I for the tasks that He asks us to do. So, be who God made you to be. Play the music you love to play, pray the way you love to pray, serve the way you love to serve.

But also be prepared to discover that what you love to do may not be rooted in His love. It might be rooted in your desire to be something you're not and He may take you to task in order that His image might be reflected unhindered in your life and ministry.

This is terrifying in that we realize that if we don't obey, then the expression of Christ through us is lost. He doesn't give it to another. It remains undone because no one else can do what we can do as empowered vessels in the hand of God. God may give the assignment to another, as in the case of Saul and David, but that reflects on Saul's disobedience to God. That means no one can steal your ministry or influence. God gives and takes away. That means you can hold no grudge when you feel held back. That means you can't be bitter because you lost your position. You have to come face to face to God. Is He testing your faithfulness when given a better opportunity? Is He testing your obedience during hard times? Is He testing your sense of calling

when it's taken away? When we say thus says the Lord, are we making it up? Is your God schizophrenic or unchanging?

Wherever you are in your development as a follower of Jesus, it is important to remember the central theme of worship. We love Him because He first loved us. Our service, our creativity, our passion is simply the response to the price that He paid when He died on the cross for our sins. We sing because we've been liberated from death and have been given a new life of hope and joy. So let us serve with gladness and thanksgiving the One who has redeemed us for Himself.

CREATING A FLOW IN WORSHIP

1. Think of your set in terms of a journey. A typical journey begins with songs of celebration and ends with songs of intimate adoration. You can also begin with songs of intimate adoration and end with songs anthemic exaltation. It just depends on the mood of the service.
2. Have at least two songs in a row that have the same key and feel. This creates a sense of movement without distraction.
3. When you move into a time of intimate adoration, use simple songs that are well known or easy to remember. You want people to focus on their personal experience with God and focus on trying to remember the words.
4. Create space to linger. Don't feel the need to move quickly through your set from song to song. This might mean repeating a chorus or hanging on a particular chord. It might also mean allowing for silence.
5. Use prayer as a means to transition from one segment of the service to another. This keeps the congregation focused on the Lord and allows you to make dramatic changes with minimal distractions.
6. Once you begin your set of worship songs, focus all your conversation to the Lord. When you engage the congregation, you take the focus off Jesus and you put it on yourself.
7. Think of your set in terms of a theme. Maybe you will want to choose songs that focus on God's holiness or salvation. Maybe your pastor has a message that you can reinforce through song selection.

SONG SELECTION

1. Choose songs that are not too high or low. The standard congregational limits are

the “D” one octave above middle “C” and the “B” below middle “C”

2. Choose songs that minister to you.

3. Choose songs that fit the season your church is in. There are songs that express the heart cry of the congregation. These are reflections of the work that God is doing in the community. Discover what those songs are and make them a key part of your song selection process.

4. Choose songs that fit the worship team. Do songs that you can do well. Your job as a leader is to make your team sound great. If you don't have the talent pool you wish you had, then pray and use who you have wisely.

5. Introduce new songs in seasons. I like to introduce four or five new songs within a short period of time. Those songs may represent a current message or season in our church life. The congregation accepts them because they relate to them and it gives them opportunity to say something new to the Lord. It keeps the worship team fresh and excited about worship. These seasons may happen once a quarter or with each new sermon series.

Holland Davis, who is worship pastor at Ocean Hills Church in San Juan Capistrano, California, and travels internationally as a worship leader and conference speaker. He is the originator of the Top 25 Praise Series and is published by Maranatha! Music, Vineyard Music, Word Music and Rolltop Music. His most popular song - "Let It Rise" - is featured on the platinum selling *WOW Worship Blue*. Other noted songs are "I Will Stand," "Who Is Like The Lord?," "Healing Word," and "At the Cross."

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