



INTRODUCTION

It's a conversation I've had dozens of times. It usually starts something like this:

Church Pastor: Mike, I've heard your guest appearances on Dr. Thom Rainer's podcast. I really need to talk to someone about our worship ministry and have a few questions. Have you got some time?

Me: Happy to talk, pastor. Tell me about your church.

And for the next thirty minutes, this pastor will pour out his heart about the issues and challenges facing his church related to their worship ministry. To be clear, not every pastor is dealing with problems. In fact, some are serving in ministries with amazing opportunities and just want to

WORSHIP ESSENTIALS

explore a new strategy related to their corporate gatherings. But, in every case, a loving shepherd has called to ask questions about the worship and music experiences of the flock under his care.

Many pastors feel completely comfortable discussing the role of music in their church. But sometimes pastors avoid these kinds of conversations, especially if they feel unprepared or unqualified to discuss questions related to music.

Usually I start asking the questions. As I learn more and more about their history, their vision, their leadership, and their congregation, I explore with the pastor all of the kinds of expectations a church can have for worship ministry—some are realistic and well thought out. Some are unrealistic and impossible to measure.

You might wonder why I would be someone a pastor would call. I certainly don't see myself as an expert on these issues. It may be because I have been a fellow traveler on this journey for the last thirty-five years. I mostly believe it's because of the growing pressure pastors are feeling with this area of ministry.

Churches that are thought of as “successful” usually have corresponding worship ministries that are seen as effective and impacting. If a particular church is struggling, often the worship

INTRODUCTION

seems to be missing something. Pastors feel the urgency of addressing these questions because they understand the urgency of the times in which we live.

Many pastors that follow the podcast, *Rainer on Leadership*, have heard my dialogue with Dr. Rainer and realize their challenges in worship ministry are common to many others. Those discussions help them find a framework to examine the worship ministry of their church.

One pastor told me recently, “It’s like you guys have been in my church. The questions and issues you have addressed are painfully apparent in our worship ministry right now.” The truth is, I have found that many of the issues these pastors face are present to some degree in virtually every church.

That’s why it was time to write this book.

Worship Essentials is an exploration of four necessary values for any church that hopes to have a healthy worship ministry. We also consider a biblical rationale of why these values are essential to the impact of those ministries.

I have made virtually every mistake a leader of a worship ministry can make and feel equipped to speak to the painful impact brought by an absence of these values. And, conversely, because I have

WORSHIP ESSENTIALS

had the privilege to be led well by great pastors and ministry leaders through the years, I also speak with confidence on the impact these values can have when they are in full bloom in a local church.

LifeWay Christian Resources has been an amazing place to invest this season of my life. Many more lessons have come through working with all kinds of churches and observing all kinds of worship cultures. Those ideas are certainly represented here as well.

One morning when I was going to the table for breakfast before leaving for the office, my wife asked me a funny question: “Well, what does the *Worship Guru* want for breakfast?” Her question gave away that she had been listening to *Rainer on Leadership*. In the previous episode that had just aired, Dr. Rainer tagged me with that humorous moniker. To this day he calls me “Guru” whenever we meet in the hall at LifeWay. Don’t worry—I’m not ordering vanity plates any time soon.

The truth is, I don’t feel much like a “Guru,” and there is no magic formula here—no five-step program to implement, and no “money-back guarantee” for worship ministry success. It’s just us—fellow servants who feel the awesome weight

INTRODUCTION

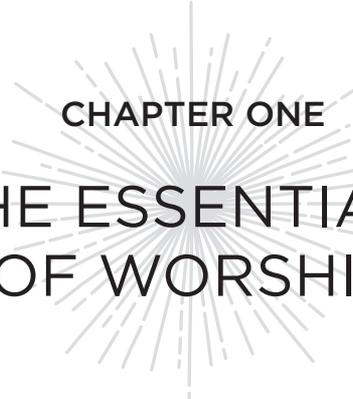
of leading worship in our churches and feel called to make disciples for the glory of God as we do.

This project started by imagining I was sitting across the table from a pastor who loves his church and longs for the worship ministry of his congregation to flourish and contribute to the ongoing mission. That was the burden that drove me to the keyboard to begin writing.

So grab a cup of coffee and let's begin.

Mike Harland





CHAPTER ONE

THE ESSENTIALS OF WORSHIP

Hollyhocks or squash?

That was the penetrating question around my house for several days one spring. The previous year my wife and I (mostly her) decided to raise a few squash plants in our backyard. To clear off a spot, I removed several large hollyhocks—a tall plant with large showy flowers—that to me, looked like giant weeds anyway. We planted our squash and enjoyed the fruit of our backyard experiment all summer. We were quite proud of our little garden, which also had several tomato plants.

As we were thinking about our squash plans for the next year, we noticed that something was growing back where last year's plants had been. As children of veteran gardeners, we knew that squash has to be replanted every year, but what

was growing looked like squash to us. We rationalized we must have left a few squash on the ground and the seeds from them must have produced the new plants.

Nice theory.

We were excited to think we were ahead of the game and that we would be enjoying squash early this year. But as the plants grew and grew and grew, eventually becoming taller than our fence, and then produced this beautiful little red flower, well, we finally realized it wasn't the squash that had come back—it was the hollyhocks.

Have you ever had fried hollyhock? Me neither. So we pulled them up and finally got the new squash crop in the ground.

True Worship

You can't get squash from hollyhocks, and you can't get the effects of worship from something that isn't worship. I love to quote my dad who told me years ago, "Never expect someone who is not walking with the Lord to act as though they are."

Worship—the way the Bible explains it to us—is not just seen from the outside. It's more than just a set of observable activities that, once

THE ESSENTIALS OF WORSHIP

completed, equals a worship experience with the one true God.

Consider just a few examples from the Scriptures:

Abram meets God when God speaks to him—he responds with a lifelong pursuit of obeying his Creator, all from a place of knowing God so well that the Divine calls the human his “friend.” (Gen. 11)

Joseph serves a God who reveals himself in dreams. His journey takes him from the bottom of a pit through a prison and finally to the palace of Pharaoh. (Gen. 37–50)

Moses meets God in a bush that is burning and yet is not consumed. (Exod. 3)

Job, through suffering, comes to a place of acknowledging, “I had heard reports about you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I reject my words and am sorry for them; I am dust and ashes” (Job 42:5–6). This worship expression of

WORSHIP ESSENTIALS

repentance comes *after* God identified Job as a righteous man.

Saul is struck down by a blinding light on the road to Damascus and is never the same. His whole life changes direction and his pursuit becomes to “take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:12b).

Whatever worship is, we know that it produces something in us that is visible—but not everything that is visible is worship. It is not merely the externals that characterize authenticity.

Consider the person who sings and “really means it . . .”

- the congregant that stands and lifts their hands while the choir sings
- the one who always speaks during the testimony service
- the usher, deacon, staff member, children’s or student ministry volunteer, Bible study leader, all serving in the various ministries of the church
- the pastor who preaches every Sunday
- the worship “guy” trying to write a book about the essentials of worship!

THE ESSENTIALS OF WORSHIP

All of them could be believers living out an intimate walk of worship with the Lord—or none of them could be. A nonbeliever or carnal “disciple” can imitate virtually every external activity of a believer. The key word there, of course, is “imitate.”

Consider further, this person could just be singing a song they love to sing because it shows off their talent,

- far from “not caring what anyone else thinks,” this person could care so much they are willing to express something that isn’t genuine just to enhance what others think of them
- the servant endlessly working for others might not actually be putting others first, but serving to win the applause of others
- the pastor or worship leader’s ministry may be more vocational than spiritual, just because they happen to be good at it

Authentic worship is observable in the life-change of a heart consistently moving toward alignment with God’s purposes. Humility, kindness, selflessness, compassion, personal sacrifice,

self-control, empathy, love for others, and a single-minded pursuit of God's kingdom expansion are just some of the visible attributes of a worshiping disciple.

Worship Wars?

Sadly, many churches today characterize their worship as “divisive” or even as a “war.” It’s “old versus new,” “hymns versus praise songs,” or even “Choir versus Praise Team.” And the key word here is “versus.”

Though this is common today, it certainly is not new. It often seems the twenty-first-century church leader characterizes worship controversy as something that is recent, as if we are somehow facing something never seen before.

But the divisive nature of worship is not new. Before time began, there was a worship conflict in the halls of eternity. Satan postured to attain the status of God, resulting in his expulsion. The war over who should be worshipped and how has been waged ever since.

If the purpose of our existence is to bring glory to the Sovereign God, it stands to reason that Evil would purpose to deflect the praise of man away from God and to himself. This, in the most basic

sense, is “spiritual warfare”—the war that Satan wages to try and keep us from worshipping God, because he hates God, and because he hates us. That’s why he tempted Adam and Eve in the garden, where we saw sin enter the world through man’s vain attempt to become “like God.” The first residents of Eden believed the lie of the serpent that they could have the worship that belonged to God, and they tasted the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3).

The early church fared no better. The apostle Paul addressed many “doubtful issues” that wreaked havoc on the early church—should we eat meat or not? What day of the week should be considered as most holy? Should women have their head covered when they pray (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 11)?

Christianity down through the centuries has been fighting the same fight over and over again about the musical aspects of our worship. A simple review of church history reveals concerns about the use of harmony in church music during the Renaissance period, Handel’s tonality in *Messiah*, the deep reservations of hymnologists like Basil Manley in the late 1800s regarding the “new” songs, or the “7-11 songs” of contemporary worship styles.

The war goes on.

If the spiritual leaders of a church want to foster a community that reflects the biblical marks of an authentic worship culture, they will have to go beneath the externals and get to the heart of the matter—first, in themselves—and then in the church as whole.

We have to get to the *essentials* of worship.

Simple Worship

In his book *Primal*, Mark Batterson quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes: “For the simplicity on this side of complexity, I wouldn’t give you a fig. But for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, for that I would give you anything I have.”¹

Basically, as Batterson explains, Holmes is calling out simplicity fueled by laziness or ignorance. “I don’t know because I don’t want to know.” But he is also calling out our natural tendency to complicate things. Over time, we add rules and procedures to just about everything and eventually complicate things to the point of making them barely recognizable.

Additionally, Holmes seems to be expressing his admiration for simplicity on the far side of complexity. That is, a simplicity that is informed and matured by the process of becoming less

complex. This is a simplicity that once was complicated, but in the search for authenticity has deliberately become simpler.

Our worship is no different.

For example—a person starts out on a faith journey. He could easily begin by wrongly assuming his worship is what endears him to God. He reads the Bible because he has to in order to stay in God's good graces. He gives, witnesses, signs up for mission trips, and sings every song because he is supposed to. He prays, but only when he needs something from a benevolent Father. Deep down, his worship becomes increasingly complex—a growing list of dos and don'ts that follow him around in his spiritual appointment book.

Then, his wife gets cancer. After the initial shock wears off, he is left with a complicated yet immature belief system. He keeps doing the same things but somehow feels betrayed by this God he is worshipping. He comes face-to-face with the fact that he doesn't know this God he praises very well.

One day, he realizes none of the things he has been doing seem to make a difference. In desperation, he goes to the Scripture in this state of mind, but no longer to put a check mark on his "To Do" list. This time, he goes in complete humility out of

hunger. “God, I need to hear from you.” He prays, but not the perfunctory prayers he has recited all of his life. Now, he pours out his soul to a Father that loves him. He sings, but not to hear his own voice—rather, to be heard by the only One who can step into the trial he is facing. He worships, not because anyone is watching or listening, but because his heart will explode if he doesn’t open up his mouth.

As the Good Shepherd carries him through the valley of the shadow of death with his wife, his walk with God loses the complexity of religion. And with this newfound simplicity, his worship becomes real.

Some realities have to be experienced to be understood.

I knew a few things about being a father just by watching my dad. The sense of responsibility, the authority that comes with that responsibility, and the ability to make decisions for your family and children, were all things I observed about fatherhood growing up with a great dad.

But when I became a father, the whole thing changed. I knew I was supposed to take care of my children—but I had no idea how badly I would want to until the first one was born. I knew I would love them—but I didn’t know I would love them more

than life itself. I understood that Teresa would be my partner in parenthood—I didn't understand how the two of us would literally become one in our parenting, a bond that continues to grow till this very day.

In a similar way, understanding worship goes beyond theological exercise, though it surely is theological. It exceeds musical accomplishment, though the use of music in worship is certainly God's gift to us of an outward way of expressing our praise. It transcends any particular music style or approach, and I'm convinced the Bible demonstrates that in a very interesting way.

Think about this.

In the Psalms we are fortunate to have a number of superscriptions from the original texts that provide insightful details. A few describe the setting of the psalm, like Psalm 34 that has a superscription that reads, "*Concerning David, when he pretended to be insane in the presence of Abimelech who drove him out, and he departed.*" Now we can read the psalm with a little more understanding of what it was about—like today when a songwriter explains why a song was written. People love "song stories."

The superscription of Psalm 45 intrigues me and leads me to a question. It reads, "For the

choir director: according to ‘The Lilies.’ A Maskil of the Sons of Korah. A love song.”

According to *The Lilies*? What does that mean? Well, it seems the original performance of this text was associated with a particular tune called *The Lilies*.

What in the world did that sound like? Some have given themselves to try and understand, but in the end, we really don’t know.

Here’s the point—if the Sovereign God of the universe preserved the text of this psalm, as well as the whole Bible—and I certainly believe he did—why didn’t he preserve the tune?

He could have. God could have given us the exact music to be performed. Think of all of the arguments we could have avoided if God had just handed us the appropriate music setting for worship along with the Scriptures.

After thinking about this for a decade or so, I’ve come to this belief: perhaps one reason God didn’t preserve the tunes was so each generation could join him in creating the music. One of his divine attributes is his creativity, and since he made us in his image, we, to a lesser degree, have that same attribute. God has allowed us to express our own creative nature as we have composed the songs with him down through the ages of the

church. And think about how much the music has changed. Each generation has found its own tunes and its own way of expressing his word and our worship response in song.

The tragedy would be if any particular generation came to believe they were the one that landed on the final melody. God gives every era of believers their own chance to add to the music. What a wonderful gift that is to us! We have the joy of adding our own expression to the song of faith!

When we read Revelation 15, we are struck with an amazing reality—one of the songs sung in heaven will be one that was written by one of us—Moses (Rev. 15:3)! That tells me that our Creator God has invited his creation to create music for the purpose of worship!

As we come alongside God in creating that music and creating a healthy, biblical culture of singing and worship in our churches, there are some core values we must keep in mind. The following chapters are comprised of that concise set of values that are common in churches with healthy worship cultures. The great news about a list of the essentials of a healthy, Bible-centered worship culture is that the list is very short! In other words, with God's help, *we can do this*.

WORSHIP ESSENTIALS

And hopefully, by the time we get to the end of the book, we just might have a way to tell the difference between hollyhocks and squash.