

JBTS

VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES



**What Worship Leaders Need Their
Pastors to Know: A Call to Theological
Leadership in Worship**

Matthew Ward

What Worship Leaders Need Their Pastors to Know: A Call to Theological Leadership in Worship

MATTHEW WARD

Matthew Ward (PhD, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the Associate Pastor of First Baptist Church, Thomson GA, and has led music ministries for almost twenty years. He is also a Fellow of the Center for Pastor Theologians.

Abstract: Many pastors today do not understand their role in their church’s worship—they have not received training in the principles of corporate worship and someone else on staff has the title of “worship leader.” That elusive role is to provide theological leadership to the worship ministries of the local church. Theological leadership assumes that pastors have done the work of developing a theology of worship. It then involves two steps: contextualizing that theology to their unique local church and communicating it effectively with that local church. While there are many examples of a theology of worship available to consider, there are few examples of a contextualized theology; this article offers two that are still general enough to glean benefits and pitfalls. Communication is a two-way process. If pastors are to be effective theological leaders, they must cultivate meaningful relationships—particularly with their worship leaders, listen and learn, and not act out of fear.

Key Words: worship, worship leadership, theology of worship, theological leadership, Jeremiah Burroughs, John Tombes

Introduction: Admitting a Need

Worship leaders (of whatever title) might prefer this article to be titled, “What Worship Leaders Wish Their Pastors Knew.” That article gets to dance through all kinds of subjects from the perspective of a worship leader. It already exists, by the way, as a series of excellent and highly recommended blog posts by Bob Kauflin on his website, worshipmatters.com.¹ This article approaches that general idea from the perspective of the needs of the local church. Churches need more from their pastors in worship than a decent working relationship with the so-named worship leaders. Churches need their pastors to understand the nature of their relationship with all the

1. Bob Kauflin, “What Worship Leaders Wished Their Pastor Knew,” *Worship Matters*, October 5, 2015, accessed September 8, 2017, <http://worshipmatters.com/2015/10/05/what-worship-leaders-wished-their-pastor-knew/>. The series includes the equally helpful post, “What Pastors Wished Their Worship Leaders Knew.”

Matthew Ward: *What Worship Leaders Need Their Pastors to Know*

worship ministries—and the worship leaders need that as well. This relationship is vital to a healthy church but misunderstood by many and flatly abused by some.

In their defense, many pastors have not been given a proper model for their role in worship, so they do what pastors always do in such situations—make it up as they go. Unfortunately, pastoral training often does not provide the tools necessary for pastors to evaluate their intuitive approach to their worship ministries. They develop an approach to their worship ministries from any number of sources, having a hard enough time deciding if it works to worry if it is right. Consider these analogies:

1. **The Black Box:** Having little to no experience in music, audio/video tech, or stage production, some pastors see the worship ministries of their church as a rather mysterious process for which they only offer vague suggestions and try not to get drawn into a discussion they do not understand over why something will or will not “work.” Leadership in this analogy essentially means staying out of the way.
2. **The Toy Box:** Some pastors grossly overestimate their knowledge of music and presentation, offering their personal preferences and opinions on every aspect of the music and worship ministries, as if they were important insights and valuable contributions. Leadership in this analogy often means treating the worship ministries as a personal plaything, managing or micromanaging from personal preference.
3. **The Display Box:** Some pastors see church’s worship ministries primarily as the public face of the church and thus care mostly about “first impressions” or how people in attendance think the service looks and sounds. Vision is crowdsourced, and leadership in this analogy is thus reactionary, passing along what people do and do not like.
4. **The Soap Box:** Some pastors believe their primary role in worship is the sermon, and they put their efforts into that element, but their sermon centrism gets extrapolated to the rest of the worship ministries. Leadership in this analogy focuses on expressing whether or not they feel that the rest of the worship service properly highlighted the sermon.
5. **The Gift Box:** Some pastors believe their primary role in every ministry is to be the pastor to all the leaders of that ministry (note: this should include paid staff members if the church has them). They offer pastoral support and encouragement and focus mainly on positive working relationships. Leadership in this analogy emphasizes the person rather than their “job performance.”

This article contends that pastors need to take a different approach to their worship ministries altogether—one that does not think of them as a box at all but an integral part of their church’s identity. This approach requires a specific kind of leadership: theological leadership. Such leadership can and should be employed by any pastor in

any church, regardless of circumstance. In short, theological leadership is more than being able to describe “what” with respect to worship; it is also more than being able to explain “why.”

Worship Ministries Are Too Important for Pastoral Neglect

As the theological leader of a local church’s worship, the pastor works with and through the worship ministries to develop and communicate a vision for worship utterly consistent with that church’s biblical and cultural identity that the church can understand, embrace, and engage. Acknowledging accountability both to God and the local church, the pastor as theological leader empowers the worship leaders of the church to enact that vision, evaluating and encouraging their growth and exercise of leadership. This requires a great deal of involvement and responsibility on the part of pastors, perhaps more than they are used to or comfortable offering, but worship is too important to be mishandled.

The previous paragraph assumes that pastors are aware of how integral the worship ministries of churches are to their purpose and existence. Books by Robert Webber, Marva Dawn, and Jamie Smith offer excellent starting points for pastors unfamiliar with the vital importance of worship.² Worship is not a job function or a weekly checkbox but the very heart of what it means to be a Christian church, of which pastors are leaders and shepherds. The actions of corporate worship contribute as much if not more toward spiritual formation and discipleship than the sermon (Christianity is not what a person knows but who a person is; people are more than brains on a stick but a mystery of body and spirit).

Worship is the whole-personed expression of a vibrant relationship with God. The experience of corporate worship connects people with God and one another in ways that defy categorization. Worship services, those appointed times the congregation gathers to worship their Lord and Savior (and by this not just the sermon), must be a priority of preparation, execution, and participation for the leadership of every Christian church.

2. The late Robert Webber casts a significant shadow over the “worship renewal” movement. His first and last books on the subject are an excellent introduction to his perspective: *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship* (Star Song Publishers, 1992), and *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). Marva Dawn’s excellent pair of books, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), and *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), provoke all the right questions with respect to worship. James K. A. Smith’s Cultural Liturgies series develops those ideas even further, as in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). One does not have to agree with all their conclusions to find great value in these books.

Pastors Are Still Worship Leaders, Regardless of Titles

The importance of corporate worship has certainly received greater attention in recent years—worship in local churches no longer suffers from wanton neglect. But movements intended to raise the profile of worship in the local church have created their own set of challenges and problems for church leaders, particularly when adopted and applied prematurely and indiscriminately, or as worship services have become an end unto themselves. For example, for a long time American churches had “music ministries.” Those ministries existed for teaching music: singing, instrument playing, and reading—songs for the adult choir to present in service and hymnal appreciation for younger generations. Larger churches even hired musicians with church music degrees designed to develop musical skill. Pastors focused on the sermon and let the music ministers handle the “music part” of the service. Though some pastors may not have particularly worried about their music ministries, they at least understood their purpose. Then, new and exciting worship-centric churches appeared, employing “worship pastors” whose primary function was leading the weekly worship service (everything but the sermon). Elements such as readings and prayers (and even the Lord’s Supper) were associated with liturgical traditions, and worship services became dominated by music. Fulfilling an already-existing notion, music became conflated with worship, and the sermon remained just that—the sermon.

As established churches observed the explosive growth of these new churches and looked for attributes they could emulate, they focused on the most obvious, particularly those in music and worship (and some decided to rename Sunday School as “Lifegroups”). But in churches in which leaders had not been thoroughly trained in the principles of corporate worship (for example, Southern Baptists), that emulation was haphazard and indiscriminate, leaving churches in a very confusing place in their worship ministries.³

A recent survey of the Southern Baptist Job Board, sbc.net/jobs, found postings for “Worship Leader,” “Worship Pastor,” “Worship Minister,” “Minister of Music,” “Praise and Worship Director,” “Minister of Worship,” and “Pastor of Worship Ministries.”⁴ What is confusing is that each position entailed nearly identical duties. The confusion does not end there. Schools of music have added new “worship” degrees that are nominally distinct from preexisting church music degrees, leaving churches to wonder which degree they should require.

Consider then the present situation: churches have “worship leaders” (often well-paid) with “worship degrees.” Where does that leave the pastor? Add to this the complications already mentioned—pastors with admittedly little training in the principles of corporate worship and the tendency to treat worship ministries as one

3. Even though the term is a part of the confusion at work in churches today, for consistency’s sake this article will use “worship ministries” to refer to those aspects of a church that prepare members for participation in any part of a weekly worship service, including music, drama, tech, etc.

4. “SBC Job Search,” accessed July 15, 2017, <http://www.sbc.net/jobs/>.

of the boxes described above—as well as the difficult nature of staff relationships (including the pastor’s dual role as “pastor” and “boss”), and pastors can find themselves functionally isolated from the worship ministries of their churches. These trends have tended to undermine the pastor’s role as the worship leader in the local church. Regardless of the degree to which this may have occurred, the response is for pastors and their churches to understand the proper role of the pastor in the worship ministry: that of the *theological leader*.

What Is Theological Leadership?

The box analogy can help with parameters for what I mean by “theological leadership.”

1. **The Black Box:** It should go without saying that ignoring the workings of a ministry is not providing theological leadership (or any leadership). Pastors do not have to have musical experience to make theological observations because the question is not “what will work” but “what should be.”
2. **The Toy Box:** Pastors have every right to express their opinions, but they should not make the mistake of believing that their opinions are any more important than anyone else’s in the church. And they certainly should not believe that expressing personal preference is offering theological leadership.
3. **The Display Box:** Pastors should certainly care about the look and feel of a worship service, but making suggestions based on group sentiment is not theological leadership (*unless* that group is clearly and intentionally guided by the mind of Christ—not often the case).
4. **The Soap Box:** Pastors should pour their heart and soul into every sermon, but a well-crafted sermon does not provide theological leadership to the worship ministries; at best, a sermon on corporate worship can only identify the lines along which that leadership may proceed.
5. **The Gift Box:** If pastors desire to have any kind of meaningful working relationship with the members of the worship ministries, they must offer genuine pastoral leadership and concern. But whereas pastoral leadership focuses on individual members, theological leadership equally applies to the ministry itself.

Each of those approaches can (and even should) play a role in a pastor’s leadership strategy, but none is of itself theological leadership.

Consider a church nursery as a parallel example. Only very shortsighted pastors would ignore the nursery completely, although some foolish pastors have deemed it inconsequential if no bad news comes out of it. Pastors may make observations about the condition of the physical space (more likely if they have a child in it) but will probably leave the décor to people with experience in childcare. At most, they may

Matthew Ward: *What Worship Leaders Need Their Pastors to Know*

look for pictures of Jesus on the wall and the presence of a storybook Bible. They almost certainly will not offer training on how to change a diaper properly. That level of interaction between the pastor and nursery probably seems reasonable, but it does not involve any sort of coherent plan for how the nursery fits into the church at large or how it contributes to spiritual formation and identity. Pastors tacitly leave those determinations in the hands of those who serving in the nursery.

This example does not convey a relationship of theological leadership. Caring about the nursery is a good start. Believing that important spiritual transactions take place in the nursery (not only in teaching infants the truths of the Bible, but also in the spiritual growth of the caregivers) is a necessary next step. Leaving certain decisions in the hands of experienced church members or paid experts is wise, and letting someone else teach the mechanics of diaper changing is prudent. Taking the time to notice the condition of the room or make cursory observations about spiritual formation, even if just from personal opinion, is better than nothing. But none of that is offering theological leadership. Theological leadership comes out of understanding who that local church is and what the church believes.

Theological leadership means setting the values of the church at work in the church nursery and communicating that intersection with the nursery leaders in such a way that they can and will apply the church's identity to the inner workings of the nursery. Ultimately, it will affect the appearance of the nursery, the actions of the workers, the curriculum followed therein, the policies of security and care, and even the budget allocation thereto. None of those decisions can be made haphazardly; each must be a part of a larger strategy tied to the clear theological leadership provided by the pastor. Having set the church's values and priorities clearly in the minds and hearts of the nursery leaders, pastors do not have to be a part of every decision; they can observe the function of the nursery to know if their leadership has been followed and applied reasonably. *That* is the beginning of theological leadership.

Step 1: Know Your Theology of Worship, and also Know Your Church

The mechanics of providing theological leadership to any ministry of the church, including the worship ministry, is very similar. Theological leadership in a church in general begins with knowing who the church is and what the church believes. Because every congregation is unique, every local church identity is unique, even with all it shares with the church universal. Diversity among churches engages a wider population and keeps those churches always reforming in the best sense of that idea. All pastors must understand fully their church's congregational makeup and belief system. In many churches, that system includes a formal but limited doctrinal statement, but pastors must identify the informal values and standards that the church holds alongside those doctrines. Pastors also have the Bible and

denominational standards against which to evaluate these beliefs. Effective leadership of any kind always begins with what *is* before moving on to what should be. If there are inconsistencies or heterodoxies of belief, pastors must help their churches resolve them. If pastors do not start with this step, any action taken in ministry is reactionary at best and destabilizing at worst. If pastors do not appreciate this step, they risk being constantly disappointed by their misplaced expectations, which will likely be at odds with the intentions God has for bringing together that unique congregation. In other words, pastors should believe that God is sovereign over congregational identity and has provided the gifts and callings necessary for that church to accomplish every purpose God has for that church, and it is the pastor's responsibility to oversee that journey.

Once the church's theological and cultural identity has been established, the process is repeated at the individual ministry level. Every ministry in a local church has a set of beliefs and values (formal or informal) out of which it operates; the pastor must bring those beliefs in line with those of the church at large, offering a vision of what that ministry looks like in the context of that unique local church. In this article, the focus is the worship ministry. Theological leadership in worship ministry in particular begins with developing a robust, contextualized theology of worship. Such a theology of worship answers the questions, "What is worship?" and, "What does worship look like in 'my' church?" Many excellent books, including those mentioned above, have answered the questions "what is worship?" and "what does the Bible say about worship?" many times over (though without consensus),⁵ and they should be taken into consideration. But rarely do those books attempt to help a pastor develop a truly contextualized (designed to fit the unique context of a local church) theology of worship.

Indeed, finding any example of such a contextualized theology of worship, particularly one unbiased by the modern culture-driven "worship wars," is difficult. This article dives into history to find a pair of obscure but delightfully meaningful examples. Coming from a time when pastors were the "worship leaders," two pastors sought specifically to influence Anglican, Presbyterian, and Baptist leaders in the principles and practices of local church worship—if not to change their minds than at least to have them take seriously the implications of their stated beliefs. One, the well-respected Independent Jeremiah Burroughs, used his London pulpit to influence the sub-committee that drew up Westminster's *Directory for*

5. For additional introductory reading to this subject, consider Franklin Segler and Randall Bradley, *Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), Ron Owens, *Return to Worship: A God-Centered Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), Christopher Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), and Constance Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

Matthew Ward: *What Worship Leaders Need Their Pastors to Know Public Worship*⁶ and influenced many other pastors along the way. The other, the controversial outsider John Tombes, was so challenged by his own sermons on worship that he abandoned his original belief system, choosing instead to influence fellow baptizers from any pulpit he could obtain. Both men tied principle to action, a key element of theological leadership.⁷

Illustration: A Theology of Worship Focused on Specific Actions

Of the two, Burroughs offered the clearest example of a practical theology of worship—so practical that his famous sermon series, “Gospel Worship,”⁸ echoed in the work of London pastors for decades. His theology of worship can be summarized in one statement: “We must all be willing worshipers, but not will-worshippers” (i.e., “We must come freely to worship God, but we must not worship God according to our own wills”).⁹ In many ways, this is a version of what is often called the regulative principle of worship, that only the Bible can regulate what humans should offer in God’s worship (Burroughs referred to God’s “direct” and “inferred” commands). But Burroughs’s theology is much more than that; it is as much a statement about the worshiper as it is about the Bible. Indeed, half of the sermons in this series dealt solely with the worshiper: worshipers must know God and His Word exceedingly well (Lev. 10:3); worshipers must exercise their faith throughout the week and bring that active faith to bear in worship on Sundays (Heb. 10:12); worshipers must come prepared to worship not only in mind but in soul (Isa. 1:13): “If ever we were seriously intente or attentive about anything, it must be when we are worshipping of the name of God.”¹⁰ In Burroughs’s theology of worship, it is not merely a matter of the actions taken in worship; it is equally a matter of who takes those actions.

The second half of Burroughs’s sermons focused on the right actions of worship: hearing the Word preached, partaking of the sacrament (Lord’s Supper), and prayer. He contextualized his approach in terms of the dominant pattern of worship in his day, the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, and also looked ahead to the directory for worship the Presbyterians were at that time debating. Using his underlying thesis, “We must all be willing worshipers, but not will-worshippers,” Burroughs combined

6. The *Directory*, a careful product of Puritan Presbyterianism, is also an excellent case study for theological leadership in worship. It is not used here because it determined the principles of worship for churches rather than help them determine for themselves. The *Directory* can be found at http://reformed.org/documents/wcf_standards/index.html.

7. This author discovered these two men while researching influences on the early English Baptists. For more about Burroughs, see Matthew Ward, *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 9, 119–120, 151, 161; for more about Tombes, see Ward, *Pure Worship*, 15, 21–23, 61, 120, 124, 146, 157.

8. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship, or, The Right Manner of Sanctifying the Name of God in General* (London: Cole, 1658). These fourteen sermons were published posthumously.

9. Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship*, 10. The grammar has been updated to improve clarity.

10. Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship*, 81.

the actions he found in the Bible with the attitudes he believed must correspond therewith. Preaching is a combination of preparing the soul to hear God's truth and then making that soul answerable thereunto. The preacher's role is to learn that truth, present it clearly, and offer uniquely measurable application; the worshiper's role is to listen attentively, submit willingly, and apply diligently. Nationalized forms of worship violate this basic principle by removing personal preparation and application on the part of the worshiper and the preacher. The Lord's Supper, being so central in Anglican worship, received an extremely concrete treatment. Burroughs believed the Bible to be clear in its description of the observance: the church must gather around the same table (near as possible); the pastor must take, bless, break, and then give the bread and cup (in that order); and the celebrants must focus on the death of Christ while partaking of the elements. The Lord's Supper is the prime example of a *form* of worship; it must be approached properly and performed properly. Finally, with respect to prayer, Burroughs summarized that the matter of prayer must be God's will and glory and all people's good, and the manner of prayer must be with understanding and from the soul.

Burroughs's sermons drip with a balanced treatment of Scripture, but that treatment does not overcome the limitation of Burroughs's theology of worship: what is an "inferred" command in worship? Consider debates over the Lord's Supper from that era. Could women be allowed to partake of the elements? Must everyone recline around the table? Should the Lord's Supper be conjoined with footwashing? Burroughs's emphasis on the worshiper's heart compounded some problems, preaching that "the Lord doth look more to the principle from whence a thing comes, than at the thing itself."¹¹ Some hearers took this to mean that sincerity was more important than accuracy. Consequently, Burroughs's followers stumbled through continuous debates over worship and had difficulty agreeing on clear parameters within which those debates should occur. In other words, Burroughs failed to develop a fully consistent theology of worship or communicate it thoroughly. But even then, Burroughs's churches were well-regarded for their example, owing to his strong and consistent personal leadership.

Illustration: A Theology of Worship Focused on General Principles

John Tombes was one of Burroughs's contemporaries. During his theological training, political authorities determined religious realities, so when he desired to influence worship, he submitted his sermon transcripts to city councils (the second sermon mentioned below was published at the request of Parliament). But his reforming impulses went beyond their tolerances, so he spent his primary years of ministry as an

11. Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship*, 67. Realize that to Burroughs, a truly sincere Christian worship sincerely desires to worship God according to the rule God has given for His worship. This statement should not be interpreted to say that being a right worshiper is more important than offering right worship; the two cannot be separated.

exile. Whereas Burroughs preached in concrete terms about the actions of worship, Tombes preached more about principles. But the message was similar: “they that are right worshipers worship the true God by the true Mediator according to the true rule, that is, they worship the true God according to His own prescription and appointment, not according to men’s devices and inventions.”¹² Right worshipers can be identified by the right end of exalting God, the right principle of both the Spirit of God and faith in Jesus Christ, and the right affection—the desire to worship in spirit and in truth. Tombes focused on exactly why God rejects will-worship: “what is devised by man [to worship God] comes from a corrupt and foolish heart, and such a corrupt fountain must needs send forth but puddle water;” God sees even the finest human innovation in worship as “childish, apish, theatrical and ridiculous.”¹³ As with Burroughs, Tombes’s approach echoed the regulative principle of worship, but Tombes used a very different guiding principle for his theology of worship.

Tombes’s explanations of and arguments against will-worship reveal a simple, but powerful, theological impulse: “it [will-worship] opposes the manifestation of the clear light of the gospel.”¹⁴ To Tombes, salvation meant a humble submission to God in Christ and a lifelong connection to God in Spirit. But forms of worship invented by men, no matter how pleasant or emotionally compelling, put sights and sounds into worshipers’ minds that do not come from God, and such human compositions cannot create spiritual transformation. At best, such worship makes people idolaters by coming before God with human achievement; at worst, such worship estranges people from God by reifying in them what Tombes calls “the Popish conceit of *opus operatum*, that the work done pleases God...though they are in no way changed, enlightened, awakened in their consciences, or altered and quickened in their conversation.”¹⁵ Such worship is the very opposite of humble submission to God. And the fruit of such will-worship is division among churches, bitter argument within churches, and even the loss of Christian liberty as people begin to impose their preferred forms of worship on others. None of those elements proceed from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tombes explained, “And although I know Ceremonies invented by men are pretended to serve for edification, yet I must profess that I never found in my reading, or experience, that ever any person by such rites, or observances was won to the profession of Christ, or brought to any spiritual knowledge of Christ, any true faith or sincere obedience to him.”¹⁶ This statement could easily be a central theological

12. John Tombes, *Jehovah Jireh: Or, God’s Providence in Delivering the Godly* (London: Richard Cotes, 1643), 4.

13. John Tombes, *Fermentum Pharisaeorum: Or, the Leaven of Pharisaeicall Wil-Worship* (London: Richard Cotes, 1643), 4. Burroughs was beloved and respected for his generous and benevolent demeanor; Tombes was held at arm’s length for his incessant polemic.

14. *Ibid.*, 6.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. *Ibid.*, 7.

axiom for worship out of which a fuller theology could be constructed: Christian worship must embody the gospel of Jesus Christ. To Tombes, this meant more than worship leaders should proclaim the tenets of the gospel or even that worship should be patterned after a gospel presentation—valuable ideas which are finding traction today—this meant that every decision made preparing for and leading corporate worship must come from a gospel source and toward a gospel end. This idea influenced early London Baptists before they got caught up in a number of political and theological controversies that shifted their focus. However, because Tombes the churchman never found a home in a church tradition, and Tombes the leader did not have the skills to inspire followership, his influence was limited.

Those two men demonstrate the power of a theological principle of worship *and* the importance of leadership. Burroughs's puritan context led him to employ a version of the regulative principle of worship that he thought best for his independent church. Tombes's acquired belief in regenerate church membership aligned him with the Baptists and led him to draw out principles of worship rooted in the gospel of salvation. Burroughs's benevolence and confidence inspired a generation of admirers (though he was too independent-minded for a truly wide impact). Tombes's prickly personality and caustic approach isolated him from lasting influence. Pastors today might see one of those two principles as a foundation for their own theology of worship, or they might be inspired to search for another. They would then combine that principle with what they believe the Bible to say (should the Bible be a core value to them), set it in the context of their local church's beliefs, values, and culture, and spin a theological web focused on coherence and cohesion. That web eventually becomes a theology of worship.

When It Comes to Worship, One Size Does Not Fit All Churches

There are two great errors to avoid in developing this theology of worship: believing it to be a comprehensive, step-by-step action plan for a worship service, and adopting a plan wholesale from a popular church or book. A theology of worship is the web of doctrines, principles, and values out of which an action plan emerges. While the Object of worship and even most elements of worship might be seen as completely transportable between local churches within one's church tradition, worship services are enacted by unique congregations; the people of those churches have unique skills of musicianship, recitation, and technology, as well as unique resources (or lack thereof) to bring to bear on their worship services. When theological leadership in worship is tied to specific actions or actors—such as an organ player who can rile up a congregation just so, or a guitar player who can drop a killer lead, or a top-of-the-line environmental projection system—and those actors are not present, the entire vision falls apart. A theology of worship is not applied in a vacuum; it must be appropriately

Matthew Ward: *What Worship Leaders Need Their Pastors to Know* versatile for any local church setting (appreciating how much congregations change over time).

Similarly, a theology of worship is not developed in a vacuum, and this is the great trap of the popular church or book. The promoted one-size-fits-all worship service, even from the author with no claimed theological bias or the “non-denominational” church, was developed out of a specific theological context—one that the reader may not share, and one that the author may not even consciously identify. Pastors must understand the theologies out of which models for worship have emerged so that they can understand how such models might reasonably intersect their local church context. (And to echo the previous point, those books were written without any knowledge of the unique local congregation or the skills and resources contained therein. References to technology, musicianship, liturgics, or even basic song leadership might not apply to a church until certain skills are cultivated.) Popular books about corporate worship are not necessarily helpful to a local church.

But church members and worship leaders may not know that, and they may propose to adopt a wide range of suggestions and examples from those popular books or popular church’s services. That is fine and healthy; it means they are paying attention to the wide world and willing to bring ideas to church leadership. It also provides priceless opportunities for leadership—beginning with understanding what kind of suggestion is being made. Pastors must learn to distinguish a principle from an application. Most input from church members will likely involve a specific song, a specific musical instrument, a specific vocal technique, or a specific piece of technology; those are *applications* of a theology of worship—the “what” (and will be addressed below). Theological leadership listens for the “why.” When church or staff members begin explaining *why* a song or instrument should be introduced, that discussion can be more easily processed through a theology of worship. Pastors must process it first themselves and then use the opportunity to help the member “think theologically,” meaning understand the theology out of which the suggestion springs and how that theology meshes with that of their church. This is not done condescendingly, like a guru to a seeker, but together, like fellow travelers. Pastors do not have to have every answer to provide strong leadership, but they must be able to guide the church and church leaders to that answer.

Step 2: Facilitate Effective Dialog about Worship within Your Local Church

This guidance is the next part of theological leadership, not only having something to say but also the ability to communicate it effectively. Theological leadership in worship requires that pastors communicate a theology of worship to the church and church leadership such that they can understand and apply it. This step demands that pastors be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their worship leaders. The

previous observation about the irrelevance of titles and degrees and even experience applies here. What does the worship leader actually know and understand of theology and denominational identity? An effective pastor engages church leaders based on who they are while maintaining a vision of who they could (should) be. An effective pastor also recognizes the relationship between skill sets. The ability to direct a choir does not necessarily include the ability to select octavos best suited to that choir's skill, let alone ones appropriate musically and theologically for that church. Likewise, the ability to play an instrument and sing has nothing inherent to do with worship leadership. Pastors must understand—with the helpful observations of trusted church members—the strengths of their worship leaders. Then, with the help of church leadership in the context of their theology of worship, pastors must also understand what skills the church needs those leaders to have. As the theological leader, pastors must find ways to build up their worship leaders in those necessary skills (not the least of which would be theological acumen) and then help them apply those skills within their working theology of worship.

Yes, that is easier said than done. Some pastors will find that their worship leaders do not have the gifts or callings appropriate to the needs and realities of their church and must ask whether they can realistically develop them. Some pastors will find that they themselves do not have the communication skills necessary to work effectively with the existing church staff and must ask if *they* can realistically develop them. Many pastors will discover that personality conflicts (and character flaws/sin) get in the way. Staff members, particularly those being stretched in areas not part of their training, want to justify expectations and prove their competence, and the process of learning and applying a theology of worship requires humility, self-reflection, patience, and hard work on the part of both the worship leaders and pastors. Furthermore, musicians can have unique personalities that pastors may not understand.¹⁷ The starting point to overcoming these obstacles is a strong pastoral relationship, one in which the worship leaders see “the” pastor as “their” pastor. Such a relationship will not fix communication problems, but it will give all parties the desire to pursue a resolution.

The obstacles will go beyond the communication process. Pastors must understand that their ideas may be challenged. Disagreements may be voiced unpleasantly. If there are any inconsistencies in their theology, those will be revealed. Conclusions may run counter to original intentions. Pastors must be humble and patient enough to hear and engage input, disagreement, and debate. Pastors must maintain constructive boundaries of that debate. If the pastor resorts to a “my way or the highway” tactic, this process will fail, and the pastor will be revealed not to be a

17. This observation comes from two decades of being a musician. For further reading on this subject, consider Rory Noland, *The Heart of the Artist* (Zondervan, 1999). Noland is a former worship leader at Willow Creek Community Church and founder of another valuable resource, Heart of the Artist Ministries.

Matthew Ward: *What Worship Leaders Need Their Pastors to Know*

theological leader. (Note: that pastor may be able to operate the church like a theater for a time, but it will eventually collapse under the weight of a cult of personality.) If church leadership proves intractable, then the pastor should be concerned. And the pastor should decide whether to be more concerned with the thoughts of people or of God.

But when this process unfolds under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit, a proper theology of worship will steer pastors and church leaders *away* from such land mines. Arguments will not be made based on opinion and preference, but on a shared sense of what is right in the sight of God and the identity of the church. The church will know that the pastor intends to guide the church a certain direction with reason, and they will know the safe limits within which they can constructively criticize that direction, knowing that the pastor will not only speak in love, but also listen in love. Worship leaders who understand and are a part of a church's theology of worship will be the pastor's greatest allies, putting their creativity and ingenuity to work in harmony of this theology. Worship leaders who trust and have a meaningful relationship with the pastor will warn of undercurrents of discontent or identify a crisis before it comes to pass. Worship leaders will not have to cope with vague statements such as "I want us to be more contemporary." Likewise, pastors can help worship leaders fill their roles with greater confidence and the freedom of understanding the boundaries and the support they have from the church.

Effective Leadership Results in Effective Application

Constructed properly, a contextualized theology of worship will help pastors and worship leaders be intentional about every possible decision related to their worship services. This spans from the obvious, such as whether the theology of a song is appropriate for corporate use, to the less obvious, such as whether an arrangement of a song is appropriate for their team and congregation, to the otherwise daunting, such as whether the church should sit on chairs or pews.

A church's theology of worship must ultimately be able to be applied to the "what" of the worship service. Consider the decisions just mentioned, such as a song's arrangement. If a key value in the church (reflected in the theology of worship) is members in ministry, then that arrangement should be playable by a potentially wide range of musical skill. If a key value is the gospel, then it should not highlight major instrumental sections or solos that actually distract from Christ by focusing on the instrumentalist. If the theology of worship emphasizes congregational involvement, then it must use rhythms and ranges that are accessible to the people of the church. There may be multiple arrangements equally appropriate, in which case the choice might be made based on the aesthetic of the church. Consider also the choice of chairs versus pews. If a key value is efficient use of resources, then the more versatile chairs would probably be the right choice. If the theology of worship

emphasizes sacred space, then the pew, being more associated with the traditional church building, might be the better choice. If a key value is respect for elders, then it could be a question of comfort (padded chair) or tradition (pew). None of those emphases are mutually exclusive, which means that the theology of worship helps pastors and worship leaders make intentional decisions based on a consistent balance or priority of theological principles and values.

Some applications are more complex than they might first appear. Jeremiah Burroughs placed a high value on scripture, but he was not satisfied with a weekly reading of scripture. Rather, his entire worship service was drawn from the pages of the Bible. Similarly, John Tombes placed a high value on the gospel, but he was not satisfied with a basic post-sermon invitation. Rather, he sought to craft a worship service in which every element reinforced the story of Jesus Christ. The words of the sermon are not enough to evaluate; neither are the words of the songs. Every rubric (transitional statements and interjections) and gesture and pause and sequence equally tells the story of worship. And pastors can lead their churches and worship leaders to take them seriously.

Effective Leadership Comes from Love, Not Fear

There are several fears that can interfere with theological leadership. First, pastors can fear the repercussions of a mistake. Worship services are unique in that they garner an opinion from everyone connected with the church (member, visitor, or family member), and many pastors have been fired due to a poor decision related to the worship service. The process outlined in this article is designed to prevent (a) just such a mistake and (b) just such a response. Through strong pastoral relationships, a strong and shared vision, and extensive discussion about the identity and direction of the church, pastors will be warned away from major mistakes, and they will have consensus support of the congregation when the inevitable disagreement arises. If a church is catastrophically divided over an element of corporate worship, there are more fundamental matters the pastor needs to worry about.

Pastors can fear losing a worship leader who is a talented musician if they push this process too hard. That is unfortunate. Music and music leadership (in worship) has been placed into a niche in which skill outweighs calling. Churches and pastors need to ask an important question: have they intended to hire a musician or a minister? If a musician (in other words, a hire based on skill and not calling), then how much authority do they want to invest over a primary spiritual transaction (the worship service) in a person without a spiritual investment in the congregation? If a minister, then how effective do they think a staff can possibly be that cannot work together in matters of critical importance to the church? And are their answers consistent with the theology of worship that they have identified? The Bible notes that while people look on the outward appearance, God looks on the heart. Fear of losing a talent

because that person may not be interested in the challenge of theological application is the musical equivalent of caring more about the outward appearance than the heart. The prospect of losing a talented musician can be discouraging—every church fears a poorly-led service—but fear cannot outweigh hope. It is amazing what careful (and caring) theological leadership can accomplish.

Pastors might also fear the potential power struggle that this process might instigate, either between the pastor and a well-paid and well-liked worship leader, or the pastor and a powerful faction in the congregation. For example, older deacons who happen to be important financial contributors of a church may resist cultural changes in a worship service designed to reflect a younger or multiracial element of the congregation. That response is simple. Fear of anything except the Lord Himself cannot be a factor in the exercise of theological leadership. Prudence, however, can be. Prudence asks the question behind the question. If a potential change in worship practices will almost certainly cause a split in the church, is that change truly best for that church? Does that change have to be implemented immediately? If a pastor and church leadership truly believe that such a change is necessary and best for a church, should there not be a way that church can embrace it?

The attitude toward any fear must always be the same. If fear can dictate theology in a local church, then that church is in serious trouble, and that pastor has utterly failed in providing theological leadership. Of course, the same can be said for any decision motivated by something outside of that church's theology of worship. If a pastor wants to make a change out of envy, or out of vanity, or based on an experience at another church, or any number of other inappropriate motivations, that church is in trouble. And sometimes change born out of a good motivation can still be wrong for that church. The beauty of a theology of worship is its ability to snuff out such failures. Decisions made for an inappropriate reason can be quickly identified, as can decisions made toward an inappropriate end. Those paths can be cut off before they are even brought before church members, let alone implemented.

Pastors are the worship leaders of every local church. They help guide the church in identifying a theology of worship. They work with worship leaders in refining that theology and applying it to the worship services. They do not have to be experts in music, technology, or anything else if they have a humble commitment to learning from the Bible, listening to the congregation, and being a pastor to the worship leaders. But that process of constructing and applying a theology of worship is not an end unto itself. Pastors should never lose sight of their ultimate purpose as the church's worship leader: to lead their churches in the worship of Almighty God for the gift of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. If the process ever becomes discouraging, or the people get sidetracked by questions of lesser importance, pastors can always take refuge in their truest role as worship leader, that of the lead worshiper. Time spent with God in corporate worship is the great rejuvenator of every process. That time will remind every pastor why this process is worth every investment.