

HOW WOULD JESUS LEAD
WORSHIP?

Biblical insights for today's church

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PART 1

INTRODUCTION

Can you imagine it? There's a hush of anticipation among the assembled crowd. The lights dim, and then comes an announcement over the PA:

'Ladies and gentlemen, we are pleased to have with us tonight possibly the most anointed worship leader ever. Please welcome: Jesus Christ!'

The crowd goes wild as the young man with boyish good looks straps on his acoustic guitar and the band kicks into one of the bigger hits from his many CDs.

Can you imagine it? Is this the image that comes into your mind if someone says, 'Jesus, the worship leader'? Or let's narrow it down: what mental associations does the word 'worship' conjure up for you? Times of singing with optional hand-raising for the keen; acoustic guitars, with or without the rainbow straps; organs, choirs and dog collars; hymn/prayer sandwiches?

Through the last few generations, trends in Christian worship have changed many times. In some ways, it is just like the changing fashions in clothing and hairstyles: as the bell-bottom trousers shifted to the drainpipe, so the modern hymn was ditched for the repeated chorus, before being upstaged by the longer worship song. Just as the way we dress expresses something of who we are, our values and personalities, so worship styles seek to express something of our take on God, in musical styles that we hope will relate to the world around us.

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We may well know people who have chosen a clothing style from a particular period and stuck with it. Churches and individuals often pick a worship style from a certain era and stop moving with the trends. Others attempt to be eclectic in their approach and draw from different ‘looks’, running the risk of ending up with the worship equivalent of a top hat, a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, a sarong and Ugg boots. Still others will be constantly moving on, always using the very latest songs, their technology getting flashier, their presentation more and more professional.

Are any of these approaches wrong in themselves? Of course not. The problem comes when we start thinking, or even saying, that our style is ‘the one’. Imagine someone saying to you, ‘The only godly way to dress is in a formal suit’, or ‘Deuteronomy clearly states that we must dress in all different kinds of styles, to relate to people from all walks of life’, or ‘Jesus would keep up with the trends—we must be completely up to date with what we wear’. It sounds ridiculous, but we do this with worship. We elevate one style and find ‘biblical’ or ‘pastoral’ reasons to justify our choice. We could, of course, be honest and admit that it’s more to do with our personal preferences and, perhaps, our image of God.

Want to dress like Jesus? Get a one-piece linen garment. And some sandals. No socks.

Want to sing like Jesus? Take a course in everyday Aramaic and learn some ancient Near Eastern scales and harmonies.

Want to *worship* like Jesus? Now we are asking a very different question, one that’s less to do with style, and more to do with heart, attitude and the working of the Holy Spirit.

This book invites you to test your worship style—your expression of worship—against the ultimate worshipper. Sure, your style is an expression of who you are, but it should also be subject to the Bible’s values and parameters for worship. We hope that this book will help you discover the core of what it means to be a worshipper, perhaps a worship leader. And at the end of it all, we hope that Jesus will inspire your worship so that it is rooted in Christ-like attitudes towards God,

one another, the community you are trying to reach and the wider world that God so loves.

I'LL BRING YOU MORE THAN A SONG...

Before we go any further, let's look at one key issue. There is a serious problem in Western evangelical/charismatic churches to do with the terms 'worship' and 'worship leader'. Many church leaders will assure you that 'of course, worship is so much more than singing'. Yet do we model this belief in practice? For most Christians, does a 'time of worship' mean anything more than a time of singing? Most people assume that a worship leader does nothing more than lead church music, so if the 'worship leader' only leads the singing, then 'worship' must just be singing.

This thinking reflects only a small part of the biblical picture of worship. When we see the word 'worship' in the Bible, we are actually reading a translation of a number of different, interconnected words. For example, the 'worship' of Jesus as described in Luke 24:52 is a translation of *proskynein*, a word meaning 'homage' or 'reverence'. In Acts 13:2, however, where we read of the Antioch church 'worshipping', the Greek verb is *leitourgein*, which is linked more to a religious service, like our word 'liturgy'.¹ Also, word studies alone are not enough, because the Bible often talks about the concept or practice of worship without using the term 'worship'. It is important to step back and take a look at the big picture.

While it would certainly be possible to argue other variations and additions to the following, this is our best summary of the biblical perspective on worship.

- Worship is about reverently drawing near to God.
- Worship is being obedient in service to God's design for our lives.

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- Worship is offering God the praise and glory that he alone deserves.

We were created to worship God in this way—to live in close relationship with him, to serve him and his world, and to give him praise and glory. It is vital to note that the Bible gives equal importance to these things being lived out in people’s everyday lives and being expressed in acts of corporate worship. The patriarchs, the prophets, Jesus and the early Church leaders had an equal concern that the people of God should be worshipping with their lifestyles, relationships, work, finances, attitudes towards the poor and so on (see Deuteronomy 26:12–13; Amos 5:23–24; Matthew 5:23–24; Romans 12:1) *and* that their worship should be expressed in songs, prayers and other symbolic acts as they met together (1 Chronicles 15:16–22; Isaiah 12:4–6; Mark 14:22–26; 1 Corinthians 14:26). Hebrews 13:15–16 is a great example of this equal concern, as in one breath the writer encourages the people to worship God through Jesus with their lips, and at the same time to remember to do good and share with others. As *THE MESSAGE* puts it, ‘God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of “sacrifice”—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets’ (13:16).

The problem for much of the church today is that we have managed to separate these two facets of worship—worship as lived out in daily life and worship as corporate gathering. Somehow we have pushed them even further apart, so that for some believers the only point of the corporate gathering is the chance for individuals to meet with God through a narrow selection of worship songs. We rightly concentrate on praising God and drawing near to him in intimate adoration, but we do so at the expense of many other important facets to our worship life. This can lead to criticisms of evangelical/charismatic worship as being individualized to the point of selfishness, spiritualized to the point of complete separation from everyday life, and formulaic to the point of boredom.

Part one: Introduction

How can we escape these pitfalls and find a model for authentic worship? When Soul Survivor church in Watford stripped back their musical worship for a season, it inspired Matt Redman to write this song, which has inspired many people to rethink their worship.

*I'll bring you more than a song, for a song in itself
is not what you have required.*

*You search much deeper within, through the way things appear,
you're looking into my heart.*

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship,
and it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.²*

MATT REDMAN, COPYRIGHT © 1997 THANKYOU MUSIC

This exceptional song points us towards Jesus as the true heart of worship. In him we see one who fulfils our threefold definition of worship perfectly: drawing near to God the Father, being obedient to his will and glorifying him, both in his everyday life and in his specific acts of corporate worship, such as singing (Matthew 26:30), prayer (Luke 10:21) and symbolic action (22:17–23). This book explores whether, in the light of the life of Jesus, our services have indeed defined worship too narrowly, and whether people other than musicians could rightly be called worship leaders. Dare we ask Jesus to show us a deeper way, where our gathered times of worship become a concentrated expression of lives lived in close relationship with God, serving in obedience to his will, to his praise and glory?

BACKGROUND TO THIS BOOK

The thinking behind this book first began to take shape when we both took the London School of Theology *Theology, Music and Worship* degree course.³ Here we learned to fuse our deepening understanding of God, his word and his people with our practice of leading people in worship. While we built up our musical skills and enjoyed some amazing times of singing praise to God, we also began

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to experience worship as much more than just singing, and theology as far more than just ‘what the Greek says’. We found worship and theology together offering the way to a life-giving adventure, going deeper with God.

In particular, Sam’s provocatively titled dissertation ‘Jesus is my girlfriend?’ really helped to spark our thinking about Jesus and worship. The paper addressed a particular fad in worship songs where the writer tries to express intimacy with God by using the human language of romantic love: ‘in your arms I lie’, ‘closer than lovers’, ‘I’m falling in love with you’ and so forth. It concluded that while the language was more influenced by pop songs than by the Bible and was probably unhelpful, the intention of expressing intimacy with God was a right and biblical one.⁴ In Jesus’ life on earth we see the most intimate relationship with Father God. Graham Kendrick expressed it like this in an email interview for the dissertation:

The supreme example of worship intimacy surely has to be looked for in Christ Jesus and his relationship with the Father, from Jesus’ baptism when the Father spoke over him the words ‘This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased’, through to the drama of Gethsemane where Jesus’ love is proved by his obedience even to the point of death on a cross: ‘Not my will, but yours.’⁵

Writing the dissertation got us thinking about two key interlinked topics—big, daunting, yet life-giving theological concepts that blew our minds and revolutionized our worship. Firstly, in the doctrine of the incarnation, the earthly life of Christ, we see the fully human Jesus living as the ultimate worshipper. Secondly, in the doctrine of the Trinity we see how we can be drawn in by the Holy Spirit to share in the intimate relationship that the incarnate Jesus has with God the Father. James Torrance’s book *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* stirred us with its central theme, that ‘worship and the mission of the Church are the gift of participating through the Holy Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father’.⁶

Suddenly worship was more than songs, words and music. It was about being drawn into the most amazing relationship ever. Jesus, by the Spirit, was the true worship leader, making the way clear for us to draw near to our Father.

Theories turn to practice

This was good in theory, and we had the opportunity to test it out a bit in college chapels and other events. Then we moved to Ascension, Balham Hill, a local Anglican church in South London. Here we had the challenge and the privilege of developing worship around the theories we had been nurturing at college. We wrote songs that attempted to involve people in the trinitarian dynamic of worship.⁷ We preached on it. We centred our worship team on the vision ‘To lead worship as Jesus leads worship’.

We discussed as a team how this vision had two levels of meaning. Firstly, Jesus was the only one whom we could truly call our worship leader—the one who lived a perfect life of worship and opened the way for us to join with him in praising the Father and entering into his presence, by the Spirit. (This meaning is unpacked in Chapter 1 of this book.) Secondly, we agreed that ‘to lead worship as Jesus leads worship’ also meant that we should look to Jesus as our role model and inspiration for worship leading. We challenged each other to read the Gospels with fresh eyes, asking how Jesus’ attitudes and actions could be applied to church worship. The second part of this book, Chapters 2 to 5, explores the wristband slogan ‘What would Jesus do?’ in relation to worship. As one of our college lecturers was fond of saying, before you ask ‘What would Jesus do?’ you need to find out what Jesus *did* do. So we studied the Gospel of Luke, with commentaries open and brains switched on, working to understand the context and the original language. We focused on relating the Gospel teachings to our experiences of leading worship in church and other contexts. Most importantly, we tried to come to the text with

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a prayerful attitude, letting it challenge our own lives and practice of worship. At times, as we did this, we were led to our knees in repentance, and many more times we took to our feet or instruments in worship as God showed us more of himself.

Our findings, as laid out in this book, are organized around four key points, used as chapter headings, which we have found useful in helping us encapsulate our ponderings. These are definitions of Jesus (and, potentially, each worship leader) as:

- Humble servant
- Leader with authority
- Creative communicator
- Reliant on the Spirit

Now, we want to make it very clear that these are just our personal conclusions, after prayerfully studying Luke through the lens of worship. You will probably come up with some different thoughts and categories. In fact, we very much hope you will. We are certainly not claiming that our thoughts, however well researched, tested or discussed, are the complete picture. We ourselves are on a journey, exploring how the life of Jesus might influence us as worship leaders and applying our finding to the context in which we find ourselves. Our aim is to spark questions, provoke debate and inspire study.

HOLDING TENSIONS

Have you ever shot with a bow and arrow? You put the arrow in the correct position, hold the bow in one hand and the string in the other, and pull one hand as far from the other as you can. It can feel a bit worrying, especially if the bow is old: what if either wood or string breaks? Yet it is exactly that tension, created between bow and string, that gives power and energy to the arrow and provides you with that unbeatable Robin Hood 'twang'.

Although we might try to avoid it, tension is actually a hugely important creative force. Tension in a movie is what keeps the plot moving along. Tensions created by suspensions and cadences are what give shape to music. Even tuning an instrument like a piano, guitar or drum kit is an exercise in tension—pulling one thing against another to create a resonant, pleasing noise.

Good theology is often the act of holding ideas in tension. For example, in Chapter 1 we talk about the incarnation. When the early Church needed to formulate biblical truth into doctrine to avoid misunderstanding and heresy, they had to hold together two apparently opposite truths—that the incarnate Jesus was (and is) both fully God and fully human. We also talk, in Chapter 2, about the Trinity—one God, three persons. We may hope for a nice easy metaphor to explain what this really means but the creeds do not allow us to collapse the tension, and, the more we delve into it, the more we will find that it gives us life.

Many of our problems to do with worship in the Western church come from the collapse of tensions that should be held and celebrated. For example, either we choose the transcendence of God, focusing on his power and majesty, or we cosy up to the immanent, intimate God, majoring on his love and grace. Yet these attributes are supposed to be pulling against one another all the time, as we proclaim and experience our God who is holy and beyond us, yet makes himself known and available through his Son and Spirit.

How about the tension between reaching seekers with easy-access gospel presentations (spiritual milk: Hebrews 5:13) and taking believers deeper in teaching and worship (spiritual meat: v. 14)? Or the choice between hymns, with their depth of lyrical content but often low cultural relevance, and the contemporary but sometimes thematically lightweight choruses? The ‘we’ of corporate worship versus the ‘I’ of personal response? Planned versus spontaneous? Quiet reflection versus noisy celebration?⁸

In Jesus, we see someone who does not fall for the temptation to collapse tensions. For example, he knows that his kingdom is not of

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this world (John 18:36), yet he makes a difference to people in the world (Luke 7:22). He came to save the whole of humankind, yet has time to stop with one individual (seen when he speaks with one penitent thief while dying on the cross for the whole world: Luke 23:40–43). He is the Lord of lords, yet he came to serve (Matthew 20:28). His yoke is easy and his burden is light (11:30), yet he takes up his cross and calls us to do the same (16:24).

Looking at the life of Jesus as a guide and model for our worship has helped us to see that we can often make false choices, narrowing down our worship style or practice to please ourselves or our congregations, when in fact Jesus calls us to hold styles in tension and celebrate the difference. The book's chapter headings pull against each other in very important ways: we are to follow Jesus' example in being 'humble servants' of our congregations and our communities, and at the same time we are called to be 'leaders with authority'. This might sound impossible, but Jesus shows us how. We are to develop our 'creative communication', planning and rehearsing music, arts and other worship experiences fit for a king, and yet at the same time be 'reliant on the Spirit', not our own gifts, being adaptable and ready to change our plans at his leading. Jesus takes what is humanly impossible and shows how, with God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As already stated, there are two main sections to this book. Chapter 1 deals with the theory and theology of how we might understand Jesus as our worship leader, based on the book of Hebrews, considering the implications of the incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity. Part 2, Chapters 2 to 5, is more practical, dealing with the way in which principles from Jesus' life as found in Luke's Gospel influence our worship leading today.

Throughout the book, there are practical examples putting the

various ideas into practice in corporate worship. The end of Part 1 presents a number of ideas as to how the theology can be applied in services. 'Leader with authority' talks about how worship can be planned, and the importance of journey, thinking through overall aims, not just the choice of music. 'Creative communicator' is brimming with creative ideas for how to move worship beyond simply singing, and 'Humble servants' looks at how we can fuse worship with social action.

You might find it helpful to study this book with your worship group, home group or other like-minded friends. If you do this, we suggest that you choose a chunk to look at each time you meet, read it before you get together, but then come with your Bibles to discuss not only our thoughts but also what you get out of the passages. We often ask questions such as 'Do you do things like that in your church?' and these can be pointers for discussion or individual reflection.

We also want your experience of this book to be an act of worship in itself, so the heading 'Worship experience' is an invitation to put the book down and do some kind of activity to respond to God. These activities could also be helpful to try together if you are reading the book as a group. It can be tempting to skip this kind of thing when you read a book (we know!), but give it a try and we pray that you will experience drawing closer to God. In fact, here is the first 'Worship experience' to finish this introduction. Go for it!



WORSHIP EXPERIENCE

If it's possible, go to a public place where you can see people. Look out of your window or sit on a bench in a park or near to some shops. Look at the people passing by and think about who they might be, what their lives might be like. Do they look happy or sad? Do they seem excited, tired, nervous or bored?

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Does anyone appear to be in pain? Are they with friends, with family or alone?

Now consider the people in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. They were real, flesh-and-blood people: Zechariah, the priest—old and alone; his wife, Elizabeth—past her best, shamed in a society that valued women for their fertility; their relative, Mary—young, poor and frightened. Do you know people who are like them? Can you see anyone around you who reminds you of them?

In what ways are you like Zechariah, Elizabeth or Mary? Are you considered too old or too young to make a difference, perhaps in leading worship? Have you been shunned or shamed? Are you seen as a failure, by others or by yourself?

Hear God's messenger speak to these people of flesh and blood:

'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John... And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord' (Luke 1:13, 17).

'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end' (vv. 30–33).

Can you hear a message from God to you echo down through the generations? Remember: 'you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Peter 2:9). You are chosen, like Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary.

Notice, too, that it's OK to have fears and questions: "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). What are your questions for God about his calling on your life? What are your fears about how that calling might work out? What aspects of being involved in leading worship cause you self-doubt or worry? Write them down or speak them out to God. He is gracious and he will listen.

While we can admit our fears and questions, we can pray that we will arrive at Mary's state of heart: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38). We can pray that, in the midst of our questions, we will rise up again to worship the God who chooses the small people:

And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation' (vv. 46–50).

A NOTE ABOUT COPYRIGHT

In this book we suggest playing CDs and film clips in church. At the time of writing, you do not need a licence to play recorded music in a time of worship but you do need a Church Video Licence to play films. Information is available from www.ccli.co.uk, where you can also purchase licences.