

**WORSHIP 101**  
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**Introduction: Widespread Lack of Basic Understanding**

*George Barna: "Most of the church people who fight about their musical preference do so because they don't understand the relationship between music, communication, God and worship. Church leaders foster the problem by focusing on how to please people with music or how to offer enough styles of music to meet everyone's tastes rather dealing with the underlying issues of limited interest in, comprehension of, and investment in fervent worship of a holy, deserving God." . . . The Barna study discovered that among the key worship issues is that church-going adults and Protestant Senior Pastors do not share a common perception of the most important outcome of worship. Congregants were most likely to understand worship as activity undertaken for their personal benefit (47%) while Senior Pastors described the purpose of worship as connecting with God (41%) or experiencing His presence (30%). Only three out of ten church-going adults (29%) indicated that they view worship as something that is focused primarily on God. One out of every five attenders admitted that they had no idea what the most important outcome of worship is.*

**Goals for This Session**

1. To encourage you to engage in some basic teaching or preaching about worship in your congregation.
2. To encourage your congregation to develop (or refine) a basic "congregational worship statement," to guide your congregation's planning and evaluation process. The process of developing and approving such a statement offers many opportunities for good teaching. For more on this, see Howard Vanderwell and Norma de waal Malefyt, *Designing Worship Together: Models and Strategies for Worship Planning* (Alban Institute, 2005).
3. To stimulate some pedagogical reflections on the best ways to teach several basic lessons. Many of you will know all the content of this session already. But consider this, then, an invitation to think about effective ways of teaching it.

*Note: our focus will be (this year) on a basic theological vision for worship, rather than on basic skills for worship planning (covered in Symposium sessions on alternate years).*

## **Danger: The Ever-present Temptation of Cliché**

Themes like

- “to worship is to ‘ascribe worth’ to something”
- “everything should be done for the glory of God, not the glory of the worship leader,”
- “all things should be done with excellence,” and
- “all texts should be biblical”

generate quick agreement among all discussants, but rarely lead anyone to new perspectives. They have relatively little traction for new learning and discipleship. Almost everyone thinks they should get straight “A’s” on matters like these. Make sure you name these themes, but realize that most leaders will assume that they are following them.

## **10 Basic Lessons**

Some of the many basic lessons about worship that we believe are crucial to teach in the context of church life today. . . .

<b><u>Basic Lesson</u></b>	<b><u>How This Can Be Taught</u></b>	<b><u>Why This Needs to Be Taught</u></b>
<i>[Introductory Lessons]</i>		
1. <b>DEFINING THE TERM.</b> We worship God in a) all of life, b) in corporate assemblies, and c) intentional acts of praise.	“3 definitions of the English term worship” See <a href="http://www.calvin.edu/worship/what">www.calvin.edu/worship/what</a>	People often slip into thinking that praise (the 3 <sup>rd</sup> meaning) is all you need in corporate assemblies (the 2 <sup>nd</sup> meaning).  We face persistent tendencies to think that worship in all of life makes public worship insignificant, or that public worship is the only form of true worship.

<p><b>2. LEVELS OF CONVERSATION ABOUT WORSHIP/LEVELS OF EXPERIENCING WORSHIP.</b></p> <p>When thinking about or participating in corporate worship, our attention flutters between worship's deep purpose, its form, its style, and its mechanics. All are important, but only insofar as they help us attend to God.</p>	<p>4 levels to the worship conversation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. _____ (mechanics)</li> <li>2. _____ (style)</li> <li>3. _____ (form)</li> <li>4. _____ (ultimate purpose/meaning)</li> </ol> <p>-----</p> <p>Worship as iconic. An icon is something we are invited not to "look at" but to "look through."</p> <p>Calvin on sacraments: "Indeed, the believer, when he sees the sacraments with his own eyes, <i>does not halt at the physical sight of them</i>, but by those steps (which I have indicated by analogy) rises up in devout contemplation to those lofty mysteries which lie hidden in the sacraments." <i>(Institutes, IV.14.1)</i></p>	<p>Left to our own devices, we are inclined to give the vast majority of attention in planning and in worshipping to its style and mechanics.</p>
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*Taken together, these to basic moves help us establish and define the territory we're working in: "our theological vision for the ultimate purpose or essence of a public worship service/assembly." ... The mechanics, style, form of worship are also important. 'Worship in all of life' is important. But so often they overwhelm our ability to think straight about the perspectives we need to ground our work in planning and leading public events. For that reason, it's very wise to delimit the topic in this way.*

*Lessons on The Being and Nature of God—The basic idea here is the it is God’s being and nature, not our culture, that grounds our worship. Whenever our awareness or perception of God’s nature become vague or misplaced, everything else soon is weakened.*

<p><b>3. THE GLORY OF GOD/ANTI-IDOLATRY.</b> Worship calls our attention to the glory of the Triune God; and it challenges the little idols—the false conceptions of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—that we are inclined to live with all the time.</p> <p><i>One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple. (Psalm 27:4)</i></p> <p><i>So I have looked upon thee in the sanctuary, beholding thy power and glory. (Psalm 63:2)</i></p>	<p>“he [or she] who worships loses himself in God, forgets himself, in order to think of God alone, to let <u>the lustrous beams of God’s virtues shine upon him, and to cause to radiate forth from his own soul the reflex of the greatness of God as it mirrors itself in his deeply moved and wonder-wrapped soul.</u>”</p> <p>--Abraham Kuyper, <i>Near Unto God</i></p> <p>Every time we sing praise to the triune God, we are asserting our opposition to anything that would attempt to stand in God’s place. Every hymn of praise is a little anti-idolatry campaign, as Walter Brueggemann explains: “The affirmation of Yahweh always contains a polemic against someone else. . . It may be that the [exiles] will sing such innocuous-sounding phrases as ‘Glory to God in the highest,’ or ‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow.’ Even those familiar phrases are polemical, however, and stake out new territory for the God now about to be aroused to new caring”</p> <p>--see Walter Brueggemann, <i>Cadences of Home: Preaching Among the Exiles</i> (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 128.</p>	<p>It is quite easy for us to come to enjoy the “yes” of worship—acts of praise, affirming divine grace. . . But our ‘yes’ only gains traction in our life when we see that it is also a ‘no’ to life-less idols.</p> <p>Further, many of us—especially veteran worshipers—can so easily think that idolatry does not apply to us. But Calvin’s insight, that all of us are little factories of idols, is ultimately life-giving and good. It helps us realize that we need God’s Spirit to constantly “tune our hearts and minds,” ridding us of all the little astigmatism we have as we perceive God.</p>
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<p><b>4. TRINITARIAN FRAME.</b> Worship is not just a matter of addressing a God who is <i>before us</i>. God is also at work <i>within us</i> and <i>beside us</i>. (Notice the Trinity of prepositions here). In worship God surrounds and envelops us. In worship God is active. Worship is <i>opus Dei</i> (a work of God), a means of grace.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Study the book of Hebrews</li> <li>2. Consider this quote: “You may ask ‘If we cannot imagine a three-personal Being, what is the good of talking about Him?’ Well, there isn’t any good talking about Him. The thing that matters is being actually drawn into that three-personal life, and that may begin any time—tonight, if you like. What I mean is this. An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his [or her] prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also know that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary Christian is saying his prayers.</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center;">—C. S. Lewis, <i>Mere Christianity</i>, Book IV, chapter 2.</p>	<p>Without this, our worship can so quickly become functionally Unitarian.</p> <p>We perpetuate a kind of liturgical pelagianism that ultimately makes the power of worship depend on us—which far too great burden for anyone to bear, and entirely unnecessary.</p>
<p><b>5. THE HOLY SPIRIT.</b> The Holy Spirit can be active in worship through both things that are planned and things</p>	<p>Simply cataloguing the astonishing variety of the ways the Holy Spirit works in the Bible. The Holy Spirit inspired both spontaneous speeches and</p>	<p>Many people mistakenly assume that the Spirit only works through spontaneous things related to our emotions (or some perhaps think that the Spirit only works on our cognitive</p>

<p>that are spontaneous; through our thoughts, our emotion, and our bodily actions.</p>	<p>carefully worked out acrostic Psalms.</p> <p>Compare that to how we speak about the Holy Spirit in informal conversation.</p>	<p>thoughts).</p> <p>To think that the Holy Spirit is at work in the overflow of emotion at a worship service is not a problem because it is too big a view of the Spirit, but because it may well be too small a view. The Holy Spirit may be at work not only in profound grief or ecstatic joy, but in quietly convicting someone of sin, in leading to profound insight out of arduous study.</p>
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*Basic Lessons about the Actions of Worship*

<p><b>6. COVENANTAL/DIALOGIC. WORSHIP.</b> Worship consists of covenantal, relational, dialogic actions (God to us, us to God)</p>	<p>Look at the script of a dialogic Psalm. e.g., Psalm 12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• begins with the plea: “Help, O LORD, for there is no longer anyone who is godly,”</li> <li>• which soon is interrupted by an oracle: “Because the poor are despoiled . . . I will rise up, says the Lord.”</li> </ul>	<p>We are otherwise inclined to think of worship mostly as a monologue: either a God-humanward monologue or a human-Godward monologue.</p>
<p><b>7. RANGE OF COVENANTAL ELEMENTS.</b> Covenantal worship properly includes the whole range of Christian experience—which we express through thanksgiving,</p>	<p>Study the types of Psalmody in the O.T.</p>	<p>Without these, we can assume that sadness and grief have no place in worship.</p>

<p>praise, confession of sin, lament, statements of hope.</p>		
<p><b>8. MEMORY AND ANTICIPATION.</b> Our best anti-idolatry campaign is to recite, contemplate God’s action in history, not timeless abstractions about God.</p>	<p>Study historical Psalms and O.T. Covenant Renewal liturgies.</p>	<p>Without historical narratives, we are likely to simply project our own cultural conceptions of the deity.</p>
<p><b>9. GRATITUDE</b> is the fundamental disposition for worship. Genuine gratitude arises out of a proper humility, as well a sense of discovery. Gratitude is other-directed (unlike ‘mere wonder’).</p>	<p>Reflect on parables of the lost coin, prodigal son, etc. Dwell with the Pauline injunctions to gratitude. Contemplate the great Psalms of thanksgiving (e.g., 136). Spend time on the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism.</p>	<p>We are very inclined to ground our worship in quite different dispositions: fear, anxiety, self-fulfillment, self-promotion. . . In contrast, when we are firmly grounded in gratitude to God, all kinds of emotional intelligence issues we have with each other tend to heal quickly.</p>
<p><b>10. WORSHIP AS FORMATIVE.</b> In worship, we don’t simply express where we are. Rather, we are given words to grow into, words we are still learning to mean.</p>	<p>Think about how toddlers learn to pray. They don’t mean the words they say at first, but those words grow in them new dispositions.</p> <p>Reflect on this (true) case study: “One worship committee decided not to include confession of sin because “we should do confession only if the</p>	<p>Without this, worship stultifies and ultimately merely reflects the place we are already at. It closes us off from sanctification.</p>

	<p>Spirit prompts us, if it is really sincere, and not pre-fabricated.” Wouldn’t this logic work just as well [or poorly] with respect to a song of praise? Isn’t a praise song a prefabricated prayer which some (many) people will actually not mean when they sing it?” . . . A heated discussion may follow!</p>	
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### **Some Final Thoughts**

1. The term “worship” is a wonderful, rich term, but it can’t by itself bear all of the weight of what happens in the Christian assembly. That’s why we need to learn from our cultures which use quite different terms to describe their primary liturgical assembly (e.g. *gottesdienst, il culto, le culte, etc.*)
2. Consider discussing this basic question: “What things do you absolutely need to conduct a Christian worship service?” ... Many things are quite dispensable: electricity, candles, drums, organ, furniture, etc. But here are some things that aren’t dispensable: a Bible (or a good memory for biblical texts), bread, wine/juice, water... What is so instructive is that many congregations would find it easier to conduct services that are richer, deeper, and more compelling if they had no access to anything but the bare essentials.
3. In many ways, these lessons comprise Worship 101, 201, and 301. We never fully catch up to them. And veteran worship leaders and pastors need them as much as rookies. Our own “worship worldview” or “lived theology of worship” is, like an car that needs an oil change, always in need some ongoing maintenance.

### **Other Resources**

- Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., and Sue Rozeboom, *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking About Worship Today* (Eerdmans)
- Debra Rienstra, chapter on worship in *So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (Jossey Bass)
- Leanne Van Dyk, *A More Profound Alleluia: Worship and Theology in Harmony* (Eerdmans)
- N. T. Wright, chapter on worship in *Simply Christian* (Harper San Francisco)
- Eight foundational principles for a theology of worship, taken from the prologue to *The Worship Sourcebook*; posted at [www.calvin.edu/worship/resources/theology.php](http://www.calvin.edu/worship/resources/theology.php).
- “What is Worship?” from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; at [www.calvin.edu/worship/what](http://www.calvin.edu/worship/what)