

# Why Worship Leaders Should Study Theology

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In his article titled “[Why Pastors Should Be Learned in Worship and Music](#)” in volume one of *Artistic Theologian*,<sup>2</sup> Kevin T. Bauder offered nine propositions outlining the necessity of musical and doxological training for pastors. The present work serves as a companion piece to Bauder’s thoughtful rationale and seeks to offer a similar argument for the theological training of worship leaders and church musicians. My observations and insights emerge from more than fifteen years of worship leadership in the local church and nearly a decade of graduate theological training. Whereas Bauder proposes the immense benefit of musical and worship instruction for a pastor without deeming it a necessity, it is my belief that a worship leader cannot possibly hope to have a long-term ministry that guides a congregation in worship informed by biblical principles, provides a vehicle for spiritual formation, and serves as a consistent Gospel witness without some level of theological training. The essential nature of theological training for the worship leader finds support from the witness of Scripture, the nature of worship itself, the structure and content of worship, the pastoral role of the worship leader, and the example of hundreds of years of Christian history.

Before proceeding to the reasons why the worship leader should study theology, it is necessary to describe what I mean by a worship leader. Under the Mosaic Covenant the tribe of Levi served as the consecrated spiritual leaders of the nation of Israel. The high priest, priests, musicians, and other ecclesiastical roles came solely from the Levitical tribe. Significantly, the priest and musician/liturgist were related and shared a common set of ritualistic expectations, training, and background. This pattern mirrors, in some part, the present situation whereby the pastor serves as the primary leader of worship (high priest), while the musicians fulfill the more practical role of worship leadership of the congregation (Levites).<sup>3</sup> Christian history notes the evolving role of the primary non-preaching worship leader.

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<sup>2</sup> *Artistic Theologian* 1 (2012): 3–15.

<sup>3</sup> The current work describes the polity structure within the majority of Southern Baptist churches that views the pastoral role as separate from the roles of ministers, deacons, and other congregational leaders. Churches that prescribe a plurality of elders or another governing mechanism will view the distinction between the preaching pastor and worship leader differently. It is beyond the scope of this consideration to address each of these leadership structures. I have chosen to work within the framework that is typical for the majority of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Throughout the centuries of Christian history, the church followed the exhortation of leaders with various titles, including cantor, choir master, song leader, minister of music, and pastor of worship. The specific title given to this person often indicates the role the individual congregation envisions for him to fulfill. Regardless of the title or position, the object of this article's attention is the man or woman tasked by the church to lead in the various aspects of corporate worship, with the noticeable exception of the preaching of the Word of God. For the sake of consistency, I will use the term worship leader to refer to this person.

## **The Scriptures Connect Doxology with Theology**

The most important reason worship leaders should study theology is that the Scriptures make explicit connections between the study of the Word of God and the worship of the church. A cursory reading of the Psalms reveals numerous exhortations to worship the Lord because of his acts of salvation (Ps 9:1–2), his righteous character (Ps 7: 17), his holiness (Ps 99:9), and the uprightness of his commandments (Ps 119:172). These are but a few samples of the varied reasons the people of God worship, but each is connected with the careful study into the nature and actions of God. Four specific passages provide a more detailed rationale for the study of theology by a congregation's worship leader: Christ's admonition to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:21–24), the connection between the "futility of thought" and idolatry (Rom 1:18–32), the mission of the New Testament priesthood of believers (1 Pet 2:9), and the link between the song of God's people and meditation upon God's Word (Col 3:16).

### **Worship in Spirit and Truth**

The meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well at Sychar provides the account of Christ's most direct words concerning worship. In describing the worship of God in the coming and present kingdom of God, Jesus describes true worship in spirit and truth. While there is some debate as to the precise meaning of worship in the spirit, the reference to worship in truth clearly speaks of worship guided, informed, and shaped by the Word of God. Later in John's Gospel, Christ identifies himself as "the truth" (14:6) and God's Word as truth (17:17). These passages work together to demonstrate that worship of God is to be intimately equated with the nature and reality of Christ's character and the depth of the riches of the Word of God. Theological training provides a worship leader with the ability to emphasize both the nature of the Godhead and the correct use of Scripture within the corporate worship gathering.

### **Idolatry and the "Futility of Thought"**

The Apostle Paul begins his letter to the church in Rome by calling both the Jews and Gentiles into account for their unrighteousness before God's wrath. In Romans 1:18–32 he specifically addresses the idolatrous ways of the Gentiles and describes their willful ignorance of God's attributes, actions, and nature. Their refusal to worship the Creator led them

to become “futile in their thinking” (v. 21) and devolved into the worship of creation. There is an element of natural revelation that calls all of humanity to worship God, but the focused study of God’s Word and His character provides a safeguard against the tendency toward idolatrous worship.

## **A Royal Priesthood Called to Proclaim God’s Praises**

1 Peter 2:9 tells the body of Christ of its new identity and restored calling: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” As the elect of God, chosen to be God’s representative icons on the earth, the church must realize its divine calling to worship in all areas of life. In *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, Donald Bloesch remarks, “Worship in spirit and truth lies in a recovery of true spirituality—the living out of our vocation to be witnesses and ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> The church’s task is to “proclaim the excellencies of God” to all of creation through the active proclamation of the Gospel and by making disciples of Christ, who are continually transformed into His image. As the study of God’s nature and actions, theology provides the content of Christian worship. If worship leaders are to guide their congregations to fulfill their role as ambassadors of the kingdom of God, they must possess the requisite knowledge and experience of God’s salvific actions.

## **Let the Word of Christ Dwell in You Richly**

In Colossians 3:16 Paul urges the believers to have the Gospel message dwell within them and to teach and admonish each other through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Each of these three terms functions as a dative of means indicating that the teaching and exhortation is to occur through the action and content of these songs. This passage provides a powerful incentive for theological instruction regarding the music of the church. The Scriptures ascribe a teaching function to the worship of the church and those tasked with leading the song of the people must be adequately prepared for it.

## **The Nature of Worship Dictates Theological Training**

Space allows for merely a sample of the numerous scriptural passages that demonstrate the connection between doxology and theology. Aside from the biblical example, the nature of worship itself dictates that effective worship leaders possess theological training. Theologians and liturgical scholars employ several metaphors in an attempt to describe worship. Perhaps the most commonly used metaphor for worship is that of revelation and response. This approach understands worship as beginning with God and his self-revelation,

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<sup>4</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, Christian Foundations (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 131.

which finds its echo in humanity's worshipful response. Theological training allows a worship leader to plan meaningful ways in which the revelation of God through Scripture and the liturgy become evident to the congregation. Likewise, spiritual maturity and depth of knowledge allows the worship leader to craft meaningful worship responses that draw connections between God's nature and actions and our response.

## **Worship Reflects the Nature and Actions of God**

Another way of understanding corporate and private worship is through the lens of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. As "images" or "icons" of the Triune God, humanity reflects the nature of God. The fundamental meaning of the *imago Dei* is found in the person and nature of Christ. Colossians 1:15 describes Jesus as "the image (*eikōn*) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." This Greek term refers to a representative statue or impress, but it possessed Platonic understandings within Paul's day. As Deborah Krause explains, "in the *Tameaus*, Plato describes the relationship between the ultimate cause of matter (God) and creation as the relationship of 'image' (*eikōn*)."<sup>5</sup> This related to the Platonic concept of metaphysical "ideas" to which particular objects in the natural world directly correspond. Jesus is the actual perfect and exact image of God in which humanity was created. Hebrews 1:3 portrays Jesus as "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." This text connects the concepts of the image of God and the radiance and reflection of the Father's glory. The radiance of God's glory speaks of the outflow of God's nature and is contained within the idea of Jesus' ultimate imaging of the Father. The prologue to John's Gospel proclaims Jesus as fully God (v. 1), Creator (v. 3), the light and life of humanity (v. 4), and the glory of God (v. 14). All of these concepts reflect proper reasons for humanity's worship of Christ and demonstrate the proper relationship between both elements of Jesus' nature – the human and the divine. The theologically informed worship leader is able to assist the congregation in pursuing the divine call to accurately reflect and express the glory of the Father in worship, which is perfectly fulfilled in Christ.

## **Worship Acts as a Vehicle for Spiritual Formation**

Worship pastors bear the responsibility to foster spiritual formation and maturity in the lives of their congregants (Heb 13:17). The understanding of worship as a metaphor for the *imago Dei* links worship and spiritual formation. As believers reflect the glory of Christ and celebrate his work of redemption, they are conformed to his image. One of the most important ways the community functions as an agent of spiritual formation is through corporate worship. As individual believers gather together and express their faith in unity, the resulting spiritual development is greater than would be apart from this experience. Within the corporate worship experience, the individual believer encounters the presence of God

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<sup>5</sup> Deborah Krause, "Keeping It Real: The Image of God in the New Testament," *Interpretation* 59, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 359.

and the transformative Word of God and participates through the faithful expression of adoration, confession, and commitment. These very acts of worship shape the inner life of the believer into conformity with the pattern set forth by Christ. Worshipers are not merely passive observers, but instead are active participants within the redemptive story. They juxtapose themselves between the historical realities of God's redemptive acts in the past and the future hope of God's ultimate restoration of all of creation.

Worship that elevates Christ and focuses upon Him is the kind of worship that transforms believers into His image. As the exalted Son of God, Christ is worthy of the focus of our worship and should be the central recipient of our praise. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul describes sanctification with the same "mirror" imagery that has been consistently used by theologians to describe the *imago Dei*. The Greek *katoprizojmenoi*, translated as "beholding," comes from a root word meaning to "produce a reflection." In this passage, the verb is in the present middle voice implying the process of continually looking into a mirror.<sup>6</sup> The result is the transformation of the believer into the *eikōn* of Christ. Hoekema describes this concept of transformation through worship, "As we continually reflect the glory of the Lord, we are continually being transformed into the one whose glory we are reflecting."<sup>7</sup>

Theological training enables worship leaders to recognize the ways in which the consumer mentality so prevalent in the contemporary church directly opposes this understanding of worship. Many churches are lured by the promise of quick growth and cultural engagement through so-called relevant worship practices. While admittedly worship should be incarnational and seek to communicate across cultural and socio-economic differences, it should never become humanistic in content or structure. Such practices elevate personal preference or need as the filter by which all decisions are made. This is a reversal of the pattern of worship described in the above passage. The goal of doxology is not to receive insight, blessing, or understanding of the Word; rather, it is the total transformation of the person into the image of Christ through the means of private and corporate worship. The true measure of any worship is not the form or outward actions, but the inward transformation "from glory to glory" into the image of Christ. While speaking of glorifying His Father, Jesus did not focus on the outward liturgical actions. Instead, He focused on the inward attitudes of the heart and the outward expression of a doxological life. In John 15:8 He said, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." As believers conform to His character, they render worship to the Father as a reflection of the glory of His Son.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William F. Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 424.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony E. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, Paperback (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 17.

In order to plan, guide, and enable worship that performs this function, a worship leader must have a nuanced approach to worship. This goes far beyond the selection of worship songs on the basis of tempo, key signature, theme, or other qualities. Worship that will transform the lives of the worshipers and proclaim the greatness of God requires a depth of theological introspection and maturity that comes only after dedicated study and the work of the Holy Spirit. The Latin phrase, “Lex orandi, lex credendi,” states that the law of prayer is the law of belief. Private and corporate worship is the experiential application of belief and has tremendous power to shape belief itself. Consequently, worship leaders have a great responsibility to structure worship in a way that is theologically sound and in which the content of the liturgy, congregational songs, and worship actions reflect the glory of God in Christ.

### **The Structure and Content of Worship Necessitate Theological Training**

As we have seen, the fundamental nature of worship as a response or reflection of God’s nature and action requires a depth of theological insight and maturity. Beyond this foundational level, the traditional patterns, structure, and content of Christian worship require that worship leaders possess a level of spiritual sensitivity and theological sophistication. This does not mean that all worship should be formal and erudite, but it does imply that the patterns and content of worship should carry several layers of meaning. This type of doxology counters the prevailing trends of anthropocentric worship.

The biblical record indicates that before the foundation of the world, God the Father initiated His grand plan of redemption, choosing to send His Son into the world as both His ultimate Image and Redeemer of fallen humanity. Upon accomplishing His redemptive work, Christ promised that He would send the believers a comforter, the Holy Spirit, who would guide them into all truth and form them into the Son’s image. This procession from Father to Son to Spirit finds its counterpart in corporate worship. The Holy Spirit, at work in believers’ lives throughout the week, draws the body of Christ together to worship on the Lord’s Day. Through the shed blood of Christ, individuals and the gathered assembly offer their praises and adoration to the Father Almighty. Thus, corporate worship is offered in the Spirit, through Christ, to the Father. John Witvliet describes this direction of worship: “God is the One who receives our worship . . . . Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is the One who perfects our worship . . . . The Holy Spirit is the One who prompts our prayer in the first place.”<sup>9</sup> This overall trajectory of worship reflects the biblical pattern of revelation and response whereby God demonstrates His nature through His saving actions and believers respond in adoration and praise. God’s self-revelation in creation and redemption finds its recapitulation in the worshipful response of liberated humanity.

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<sup>9</sup> John D. Witvliet, “The Opening of Worship: Trinity,” in *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 3–4.

While there is no explicit pattern or liturgy within the New Testament, Christian history and practice demonstrate a natural four-fold pattern of worship consisting of the Gathering, Word, Table, and Dismissal.<sup>10</sup> This broad view of worship demonstrates God's self-revelation of His Triune Being and thus serves as an *imago Dei*. God the Father is the initiator of worship and actively seeks those who will worship Him (John 4:23). The Father's self-revelation and call to those who bear His image initiate worship and constitute the impetus for the Gathering of the body of Christ. Early within the worship service, the majesty and nature of the Father must be on display. D. A. Carson emphasizes the importance of this magnification of God the Father as a central axis of worship: "If you wish to deepen the worship of the people of God, above all deepen their grasp of his ineffable majesty in his person and in all his works."<sup>11</sup> The display of the person of Christ and the celebration of His salvific work form the basis of worship through the Word and at the Table. Christ, the *Logos* of the Father, meets with His body through the spoken and taught Word of God. The congregation participates in the communion between the Father and Son as they partake of the Table and worship through symbolic action. Finally, the Son commissions the body of Christ to fulfill the Father's mission and the Holy Spirit dismisses the assembly and empowers it for faithful service. Both the directionality and structure of the corporate worship gatherings depict the triune nature of God and thereby serve as images of God.

The content of worship must be theologically rich and able to nourish the congregation. As a worship leader I am keenly aware of the limited amount of opportunities I have each week to help my congregation express their worship toward God and be transformed into the image of Christ. A typical Sunday worship service sees the congregation singing five hymns or worship songs. This average translates into two hundred-sixty opportunities to sing and express the truth of God's Word each year. This figure obviously does not include any songs that may be repeated in a given year. This demonstrates the absolute necessity to maximize every opportunity to have the congregation sing texts that are biblically rich and suited to carry the worship of God's people in song. Worship leaders simply do not have the luxury of selecting music that is inadequate to the immensely important task of the worship of the triune God. The great doctrines of the faith provide the vocabulary of worship and allow believers to move beyond "just" praising God into a clear articulation of God's nature and retelling of his mighty acts of salvation. In order to select worship songs, corporate readings, and other worship actions that will perform this task, worship leaders need to possess

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<sup>10</sup> For detailed discussion of traditional liturgies and this four-fold pattern of worship, see Franklin Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997); Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996); Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Cheslyn Jones et al., *The Study of Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Robert Webber, *Worship Old & New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994); James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); and Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson, "Worship under the Word," in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 31.

an understanding of the Scriptures, be familiar with Christian history, and be exposed to a variety of creative expressions of worship and praise.

### **The Pastoral Role of the Worship Leader Requires Theological Training**

The role and responsibilities of the worship leader have undergone a dramatic transformation in the past century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Southern Baptist churches had a layperson who served as a “song leader.” The musical selections were drawn from regional hymnals or revival song collections. Following World War II, Southern Baptist churches experienced dramatic growth and developed fully graded music education programs and organizational structures. This led to the change of nomenclature to “minister of music,” which brought with it the expectations that the chief musician within a church also bore the responsibility of caring for and educating the congregation. The past few decades have seen the terminology change to include some sense of pastoral responsibility. In many congregations the worship pastor functions in an associate role to the senior or preaching pastor in the responsibilities of providing spiritual and organizational direction to a church, the pastoral care of shepherding the flock of God, and in administering church discipline.

The worship pastor in the twenty-first century is expected to possess a wide range of musical skills crossing several disciplines. In addition to the traditional musical expectations, worship pastors need significant training in theological issues, counseling, leadership, administration, and other pastoral disciplines. Faithful men and women have fulfilled these roles for years as church musicians, but churches are coming to formally view their leaders differently and that brings with it greater expectations. Theological training enables a worship pastor to understand more completely his calling and develop the necessary skill set to face twenty-first century challenges in ministry and pastoral leadership.

### **Christian History Demonstrates the Connection Between Theology and Doxology**

The final reason I propose that worship leaders need to study theology is the witness of Christian history. Much of Christian reflection and theology developed as a response to questions and concerns of worship. As Carl Trueman states in *The Creedal Imperative*:

Historically, one could make the argument that Christian theology as a whole is one long, extended reflecting upon the meaning and significance of that most basic doxological declaration, “Jesus is Lord!” and thus an attempt to provide a framework for understanding Christian praise.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 135.



The early church struggled to find congruence between the monotheistic command of the Shema (Deut 6:4–9) and this acclamation of deity and worship of Christ. Later theological declarations and creedal statements were the logical expressions of the effort to worship Christ as fully man and fully God.

The Magisterial Reformers brought about great liturgical renewal along with their theological convictions. Luther, Bucer, and Cranmer developed new liturgical patterns that kept with historical foundations yet reflected their particular theological persuasion. Many of these great theologians either composed new music for the liturgy or worked alongside poets and musicians to craft songs of praise that were theologically sound. The Wesley brothers, influenced by the Moravian Brotherhood, gave the church a rich repository of hymnody, while at the same time starting the Methodist Church. The theology and practice of the revivalists and musicians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continue to shape much of the worship practices of today.

## **Conclusion**

The witness of history and Scripture demonstrate undeniably that theology always shapes doxology. Similarly, worship is the environment where most congregational members integrate their theology with praxis. A particular denomination's theological perspective will always shape the liturgy, worship practices, and traditions of a congregation. Every decision concerning the worship within the local congregation comes from a certain theological presupposition. This is evident in the practice of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper as well as musical selections and other liturgical actions. The primary worship leader of a congregation must possess the experience, training, and spiritual insight to make informed decisions concerning these practices.

In order to be a faithful servant of Christ, the local church, and a particular theological tradition, a worship leader must be able to draw from a repository of exegetical, hermeneutical, and historical study of the Bible and Christian history. Such theological training prevents a leader from developing spiritual myopia and neglecting the collective wisdom of Christian history as well as the work of the Spirit in the present age. As literally the "study of God," theology provides the lifelong foundation for the worship leader's task of guiding a congregation to be captivated with God's character and great acts of salvation. The imperative nature of our task and calling demands that we put every effort into leading our people in the worship of the Triune God, and this must include theological training and reflection.