

Worship on the Cart of Experience

Joseph R. Crider¹

David again assembled all the choice men in Israel, 30,000.² He and all his troops set out to bring the ark of God from Baale-judah. The ark is called by the Name, the name of Yahweh of Hosts who dwells between the cherubim.³ They set the ark of God on a new cart and transported it from Abinadab's house, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the cart⁴ and brought it with the ark of God from Abinadab's house on the hill. Ahio walked in front of the ark.⁵ David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord with all kinds of fir wood instruments, lyres, harps, tambourines, sistrums, and cymbals.⁶ When they came to Nacon's threshing floor, Uzzah reached out to the ark of God and took hold of it because the oxen had stumbled.⁷ Then the Lord's anger burned against Uzzah, and God struck him dead on the spot for his irreverence, and he died there next to the ark of God.⁸ David was angry because of the Lord's outburst against Uzzah, so he named that place an Outburst Against Uzzah, as it is today.⁹ David feared the Lord that day and said, "How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?"¹⁰ So he was not willing to move the ark of the Lord to the city of David; instead, he took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. (2 Sam 6:1–10 CSB)

David, a worship leader after God's own heart, had a 30,000-man choir, all the instruments of the ancient world, an authentically responsive congregation consisting of the "whole house of Israel," and yet one of the greatest worship experiences of the biblical era ended in tragedy. Uzzah died.

¹ Joseph R. Crider, DA, is dean of the School of Church Music and Worship at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. This article is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Scripture-Guided Worship: A Call to Pastors and Worship Leaders*.

For me, the story of Uzzah is like a flashing yellow caution light on the road I travel as a worship leader. The Uzzah story cautions me over and over again that worship facilitated on the cart of what seems to “work” (pragmatism), rather than according to the unwavering truths of the Word of God, will ultimately harm the people worshipping under my direction. Uzzah serves as a metaphor for those we lead, and David a picture of those who direct and lead the corporate gathering.

Not only are David and Uzzah metaphors, but the story itself presents a powerful lesson for those who lead the weekly corporate gathering. Under the supervision of David the worship leader, Uzzah walked alongside the ark of God, which had been placed on a cart in the fashion of the Philistines. And that single act (placing the ark on an ox cart rather than on the shoulders of the priests) clearly disregarded God’s instruction for ark transport and resulted in Uzzah’s death. The great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote in a sermon he preached in 1860 “that the death of Uzzah was the punishment upon the whole people for having neglected to observe the minute laws of God in every particular. . . . Now this is the pattern for a Christian – the book of God which lies before me.”

Pastors and worship leaders who sculpt and facilitate weekly worship will be held accountable for the spiritual health of their congregations, and the story of David and Uzzah on the road to Jerusalem should resonate as clearly today as it did the day Uzzah died. I would like to share a bit about my own journey on the road of worship leading to provide a context for some of my concerns. One of those concerns is the pragmatic “experiential nature” of some evangelical worship, so I will discuss briefly the concept of pragmatism in worship or “worship experience,” and when I say “experience” I realize that we could dive into that word and the concepts associated with it on a phenomenological level, but that is not my goal in this paper. I am using the term as a practitioner, and therefore I am delimiting the scope of the term more to the worship leader’s actions in facilitating congregational responses in worship.

Next, I would like to share just three of many potholes that our worship carts might stumble into and out of in our modern worship culture. And lastly, I would like to offer some suggestions for fostering some spiritual CPR on the Uzzah’s in our churches as we

realize more and more how spiritually formational worship is among our people.

Just as David joyously and sincerely attempted to cart the ark of God to Jerusalem, for years as a worship leader, I ardently desired to bring people into the presence of God through an *experience*. In much of North American evangelicalism, worship leaders seem to prioritize creating a corporate worship *experience*. But in producing an experience, where is the focus? On the *people*.² I am not saying to disregard our congregations—that is not my point. My concern is that focusing on “the way people feel” during worship is derailing true biblical worship.

When corporate worship is designed first as an *experience* or a production, with all the requisite accoutrements (intelligent lighting, the newest songs, an organist with a DMA in performance, a carefully staged platform, perfect acoustics for an a cappella choir, or fog machines), the focus of the service may be functionally directed *to and for* the people in the pews.³ Unfortunately, when that happens, worship turns into a time when people focus more on themselves and what makes them feel good rather than on the One who invited them in the first place. As a worship leader, I did not realize that for a long time, I was chasing after pragmatism. I was incessantly asking the question, “What is working?”

The concept of *experience* in worship is central to any kind of worship, especially Christian worship, but as a worship leader, I actively searched for different triggers to generate experiences for our people that kept them happy and engaged during our gatherings. In the end, focusing on designing and producing pragmatic experiences clouded my realization that I could actually trust completely in the all-satisfying power and authority of the Word of God. Why did Uzzah die? Because David neglected the Scriptures. Why are many of the people in our churches spiritually dead? Because the Scriptures are missing from our gatherings.

² I frequently remind myself and my students that people are the ministry, not the music. However, corporate worship cannot be first focused on the worshiper.

³ I am not saying that Christian worship is not an experience. It is indeed! As a worship leader, I was simply confused between a corporate worship experience that seemed to work (people being engaged), and who or what they were actually engaging with.

Several years ago, a businessman shared a book with our pastoral staff called *The Experience Economy*. The subtitle of the book revealed the key insight espoused by authors Joseph Pine and James Gilmore: *Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*.⁴ The primary idea in the book is that people don't simply want to buy a particular product or service, they want an experience, and the better the experience, the more loyal the customer.

In contrast, Henry Blackaby's Bible study titled *Experiencing God* was making a significant impact on our church, and it proved to be a powerful force in helping people develop in their *relationship* with God. But therein lies the significant difference in event-based pragmatism and an authentic engagement with the living God as Blackaby defines it. We worship leaders may have a tendency to think and plan more for a pragmatic production (experience) rather than facilitating a Bible-saturated dialogue between God and his people built on the *relationship* they have with him through Jesus Christ, like Blackaby encourages.

To be transparent, as a worship leader, I had developed some significant skills in creating moods and moments with music and lights and videos—all of which can be wonderful tools in worship services; however, I have realized it is entirely possible to worship the actual experience of worshipping rather than the One to whom our worship is due. David designed a worship event of epic proportion to draw people back to God.

But, as can happen in the best-orchestrated worship services, the unexpected struck: the cart hit a pothole, causing the ark to lurch sideways. Uzzah instinctively reached out to secure the ark and—God killed him. David tried worshipping the holy God of Hosts by copying the practice of the Philistines, and God's anger left a corpse beside the cart.

Like David, we worship leaders may imitate the Philistines' mode of worship—even though we do it to bring people into the presence of God. Now, speaking of imitating, let's be honest, worship leaders (myself included) consciously or even unconsciously imitate other leaders. We steal phrases, mannerisms, and even vocal inflections as we sing and as we speak. But the reality of biblically based

⁴ B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 98–99.

engagement with God is that *self-actuated worship is no more possible than self-actuated salvation*. Jonathan Edwards said, “We contribute nothing to our salvation except the sin that made it necessary.” Worship leaders and worshipers may need to be reminded that we bring nothing to worship except a realization that *by grace, Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is the only one who makes worship possible*, and our worship is a response to him and his Word. As missionary and worship theologian Ron Man so beautifully expresses, “God accepts and delights in our worship, not because of our efforts or our artistry or even our spirituality, but because of the Son’s continual offering of worship in our place and on our behalf.”⁵ Therefore, worship leaders are set wonderfully free when they realize that corporate worship is not something they need to carry on their backs or “conjure up” like a high school pep rally. Authentic, biblically guided Christian worship will never be initiated because of a majestic organ sound, a hot band, a 200-voice choir, or an enthusiastic worship leader. Using the right groove or the most ethereal synth pad or just the right loop does not initiate getting people’s “worship on.”

David’s focus was getting the ark to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship, and beginning a revival for Israel. David was so focused on the goal, he did not realize the method of carrying the ark was equally critical. What worked for the Philistines was not appropriate for God’s people. It was not until Uzzah died that David finally asked the right question, “How can the ark of God ever come to me?” (2 Sam 6:9).

The problem with today’s worship services is not whether there is one guitarist on a dark stage or a fully robed choir. When we fail to worship God the way He prescribes, we too unthinkingly commit the unthinkable: We use the secular wagon of pragmatic experience to reach for a holy God without our Mediator.

Imitating high art culture or a rock concert culture will never substitute for God’s prescribed directions and will inevitably result in a diminished view of God. No matter if we lead our people with sincere authenticity, if we do not approach worship in the prescribed way, our efforts, like David’s, will end in disaster.

⁵ Ron Man, *Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 59.

The ark of God being carted by oxen rather than carried by priests placed it in a precarious position. The unprescribed bovine ark carriers stumbled, perhaps due to a pothole, causing the ark to slide off the cart. Likewise, when worship pastors rely on experience to bear the weight of the worship service, they are at greater risk to twenty-first-century potholes that threaten our churches. There are many of these potholes, but I will highlight just three of them.

Pothole 1: How Do We Win the Tug-of-War with the World?

A pothole causing potential whiplash in corporate worship is the pervading religious syncretism rampant in our culture. Christians who attend church on Sunday mornings have been bombarded throughout the week with multiple views of God, themselves, and the world around them that sound disconcertingly close to biblical truth and yet are insidiously dangerous: “God wants you to be happy.” Or, “Our world is united by love so we can live our lives with vastly different views of truth.” It is a daunting task to consider all of the Christ-forming recalibration that needs to occur in a 60–75-minute gathering when people have been pounded throughout the week by advertisements, podcasts, movies, television, and social media with mis-forming and mis-shaping world views. Can music apart from the Word of God and slick production serve as an antidote in an ever-growing syncretistic world?

Pothole 2: Where’s the Specific Order of Worship in the New Testament?

One of the most confounding challenges of considering what the Bible teaches specifically about weekly worship gatherings is that there are no detailed instructions outlining an explicit order of worship in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, an uncountable variety of worship service styles and structures exists among evangelical churches. As D. A. Carson so articulately expresses, “It is not easy to

find an agreed-upon method or common approach to discovering precisely how the Bible should re-form our views on worship.”⁶

Pothole 3: What Is the Role of the Worship Leader and Should They Be Theologically Trained?

Without trekking in detail through the history of changing worship leader roles in evangelical churches over the past fifty years, it might be helpful to consider one small but significant paradigm shift: the title change from “minister of music” to “worship leader.” As pastors and church leaders began looking more for the worship-leading guitarist or pianist and less for the music minister/choral director, they unwittingly placed more weight on the new Sunday morning troubadours than they may have intended. According to Dr. Ken Boer of Memphis, “The worship leaders in the new contemporary order found themselves responsible for worship planning, public prayer, spoken transitions, and being sensitive to the congregation’s emotional involvement.”⁷ The job rapidly (and rightly) morphed from musical leadership to spiritual formation of the congregation. And for many churches, the weight of responsibility for effective corporate worship has been placed on many good musicians who often have little biblical training in the theology of worship. That was me. I was a sincere, well-meaning, musically adept musician leading emotionally charged experiences but I had no real understanding of the biblical “what” and “why” behind the weekly worship gathering.

So what happens when the production and the experience and the music or technology drive the worship? I contend, as in the story of Uzzah, biblical worship dies. Worship dies when the leaders try to “carry” corporate worship on something other than Jesus

⁶ D. A. Carson, “Worship under the Word,” in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 14.

⁷ Kenneth Alan Boer, “A Comparative Content Analysis of Worship Leader Job Descriptions and Undergraduate Worship Leader Curricula in the Southern Baptist Convention” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 1.

Christ, who is most clearly and tangibly revealed through his Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. How does this happen? Think through the following progression:

If people are not responding in any way to the Word of God, then who or what are they responding to?

- the music
- a charismatic leader
- the atmosphere of the room

If people have been conditioned to respond to the music and the leader rather than the Triune God through the truths of the Word in which he revealed himself, then both the music and the leader bear the burden of fulfilling the expectations of those gathered.

When the leaders (through the music) work to meet their own emotional expectations and the expectations of those gathered with the “right” sound and all the necessary atmospheric mood-creating devices, then well-meaning leaders and worshipers potentially may equate the emotion of the moment with the presence of the Holy Spirit. As Harold Best so aptly articulates, “Much of what we call worship may only be manipulation, self-consciously contrived and depending more on conditioned reflex than faith . . . [the] production [becomes] more important than content.”⁸

Worship leaders and worshipers must never “credit music with the power to bring worship about.”⁹ God seeks out and invites his people to worship him (John 4:23), and his redeemed are able to respond to him most authentically when they respond to something they can trust to be true and right and perfect – God’s Word. Without Scripture saturating corporate worship, people may respond to something or someone other than Jesus Christ. And when Christ is not the object of worship, the Holy Spirit is not the One empowering the worship. I contend that Word-less worship leads to Christ-less worship, which leads to Spirit-less worship. Most evangelicals rally around the Bible as infallible and inerrant, yet the functional practices of the weekly service are void of Scripture.

⁸ Harold M. Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper-One, 1993), 148.

⁹ Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, 57.

Our people are desperate for an experience, but it's not one we can manufacture for them. Their longing for an experience is actually an innate desire for an encounter with the God who designed them, and that is only ever and always done through the Person of Christ by the Holy Spirit. So, if we cannot manufacture an experience that will lead to an encounter, why are we here? How do we facilitate an encounter with the Triune God? The portal to God's Presence is not experience, but Christ Himself. The time has come for us to put the weight of worship on the back of the only one who can carry it—our High Priest, Jesus Christ.

How do we move the burden of worship from the cart of experience to the whip-scarred back of our Savior? Christ is not merely the honored guest speaker; through His Word *He is the worship leader and His Spirit the innervating power of Sunday mornings*. Scripture must not simply accessorize but structure the worship contour. When Scripture is the scaffolding, the beams and lumber, the roof, the doors, the windows (as Constance Cherry expounds in her book *The Worship Architect*),¹⁰ we and our congregation will get the glimpse of glory for which all of our hearts were designed to long after. Those sculpting worship are entrusted with a sacred stewardship. The pinnacle of that stewardship is for worshipers to respond to an accurate presentation of the Triune God. As God demonstrated for us through Uzzah, we cannot touch God. We need a Mediator. If we cannot touch God, how can we encounter Him? Through Christ, by the power of the Spirit, and his Word.

Music does not have the power to unite God's uniquely diverse people. A worship leader's personality will fall short in engaging everyone in the congregation; no matter how excellent the performance in any style of music, not all will be captivated by the artistry of the performer. Only Scripture has the power to unite. Scripture is transtemporal; it is effective through the ages. It is transcultural; it is perfect in every culture. It is transgenerational; there has never been an age that was too old or too young to consider its words relevant. For these reasons, the Word of God is the greatest unifier of the church. Because of the Holy Spirit, God promises that the Word does not return void.

¹⁰ The premise of Constance Cherry's book *The Worship Architect* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010) is built on the idea of designing and building a biblical structure for corporate worship and is essential reading for worship leaders.

So, how do we revive our Uzzahs with some CPR? Allow me to describe a scene in my own life where I was gasping for breath as a worship leader, and I know my people were on life support as well:

I remember sitting at my kitchen table and weeping. I was confused, fearful, desperate. “Oh God! Show me how to do this. I don’t know how to lead worship for so many people who are asking for so many different things.” There were complaints from several people that I had ended the tradition of weekly “special music,” and they were missing their favorite soloist. Others complained that we sang too many hymns while another faction protested that I didn’t lead enough hymns on a weekly basis. Some people were convinced that a choir and orchestra should not have a role in any kind of modern worship. If song selection, special music, and choirs didn’t stir concerns, it was as certain as the change of seasons that parents of high school students would begin a yearly chorus of protest after summer youth camp: “You should go to camp to see and experience the youth in their worship. . . . Oh, how I wish we could worship on Sunday mornings like them! We are missing out and the youth really know how to worship!”

Ad to this the plight of a growing number of ministers of music and worship leaders everywhere: the satellite branch of the metropolitan mega church plopped six professional band members and a Nashville-quality-voiced worship leader a mile from a 150-year-old Baptist church to begin a new church plant and the life just got sucked out of the congregation as scores of people left to experience the studio-quality worship of the newest church in town.

Throughout the Psalms and in the historical accounts of the nation of Israel, we see David pleading with God to incline his ear to his need, but our Lord, in his tender goodness, *inclined David’s ear to God*. Although David “was angry because of the Lord’s outburst against Uzzah” (1 Chron 13:11), David saw the blessing the Lord bestowed on the house of Obed-edom while the ark of God resided there (2 Sam 6:11), and David was reminded of the blessings that come from simple *obedience to God’s Word*. Once again, David attempts to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem. But this time, the ark is not transported on a cart but on the backs of priests. David said, “No

one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, because the LORD has chosen them to carry the ark of the LORD and to minister before him forever” (1 Chron 15:2). A simple step of obedience to God’s Word made all the difference in the second and successful parade of praise. Notice, nothing else changed. David was clear in his instructions as he summoned Israel’s spiritual leaders: “He said to them, For the LORD our God burst out in anger against us because you Levites were not with us the first time, for we didn’t inquire of him about the proper procedures” (1 Chron 15:12-13).

The problems I faced as I cried out to God about leading worship in our church were real and gut-wrenching. For some of you, the issues are real for you in this very moment. But there is an unspeakably glorious vista just beyond the complaints of special music, youth understanding worship better than you, and the megachurch satellite campus a mile from your church building. As we call out to God for help, in the same way He did for David, he will do for *us as he inclines our ear to his Word*. He did it for me when I finally realized my focus could not be on worship methods or trying to copy the techniques of the church down the street. God wanted me to trust him by trusting his Word, and in his Word I found new life for the worship in our church. As the Lord in His tender goodness inclined my ear to His Word, he graciously directed my first feeble attempts at doing something I dubbed “Scripture-Guided Worship.”

Winston Churchill once said: “We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.” Similarly, what is true of physical buildings is true of worship structures as well. We shape worship structures; thereafter, they shape us. The Word is the never-ending well of insights into the Person of Jesus Christ, because every word in the Scriptures serves to illuminate him and his gospel.

There are four keys that I would like to identify as CPR measures in basing the musical portion of the service on the Bible: First, a *trust in the authority of Scripture, allowing the specific passage to narrate the worship story-structure and clarify the transition statements between elements*. As the worship pastor, I have nothing to say to our congregation that was more important than what is in the Bible. Certainly, I use other words as connective tissue between the elements of the worship service, but what is said, prayed, and sung are all intimately tied to that particular day’s passage. And when the pastor preaches, he stands and speaks not from his own positional

authority, but on the authority of the words of God. Relying on the Scriptures as God's true Word provides the people with a fundamental baseline upon which they see their own life narratives against the Story that gives their lives meaning.

Second, *music is placed in its rightful place – under the Word of God as a support, not as a replacement for it.* For many worship leaders who design and implement the weekly gathering, the primary approach to developing a worship order centers on what songs are sung. In other words, many worship leaders create worship orders that are *song-driven rather than Scripture-driven.* Do the following questions sound familiar as Sunday planning begins?

- “What haven't we sung in a while?”
- “What are the top songs on the CCLI list?”
- “What five songs can we use this week?”
- “What two or three up-tempo opening songs flow well together?”
- “I need a good power ballad before the sermon . . . what can I use?”

As good and appropriate as thousands of hymns and songs are, worship leaders should be able to give a clear and specific reason for using every song during a worship service. “It's been a long time since we've sung that hymn” is not a valid reason for including a song. “This song has a cool bridge” or “I love the groove of this song” provides absolutely no biblical and spiritual warrant for use in a worship service. When I heard Harold Best say, “Music is a wonderful servant, but a horrible master,” it was a eureka moment for me. The music in worship is not the point, Jesus Christ is, and people are most clearly pointed to the Son of God when the Word of God is the source of revelation. Music is a powerful instrument to support God's Word, but it can never replace it.

Third, *the Scripture (not the musical sound or style) is the primary focus of participation among various ages and cultural backgrounds within a congregation.* When a worship leader sets up a song or a hymn through Scripture, the congregation understands the purpose in singing the song, but even beyond that, the emphasis shifts from the music to the Scripture driving the music choice.

The key for the worship leader is to demonstrate that the Scripture is what gives songs and hymns their relevance and purpose within the contour of the service. When worshipers connect the dots between Scripture and the song, their sensitivity to truth goes up, and their personal preferences concerning the musical styles fade. If 80-year-old Mrs. Bell first hears the “unsettling” sound of a driving guitar as the introduction to a doctrinally rich new song, the odds that she will engage are relatively slim. However, if the same song is preceded by the Scripture from which the song is based and the worship leader gives a brief transition statement highlighting the connections between the Scripture and the song, Mrs. Bell has a more compelling reason to participate, because her response is to the Word not to the song. The song necessarily loses its place of prominence as it is placed under the guiding authority of the Word.

Fourth, *by relying on the Bible, the worship planner never runs out of material.* As I sit down to work through an order of worship, I never begin by looking at a blank piece of paper. I also never have to begin a worship service planning session by opening the “Songs” tab on the Planning Center app and praying that the Holy Spirit would supernaturally highlight the right songs for the week’s service. The Bible contains hundreds if not thousands of worship service outlines waiting to be explicated by singing through the passages, praying through the passages, preaching through the passages, giving through the passages, baptizing through the passages, serving the Lord’s Supper through the passages, and dismissing the congregation through the passages.

If you agree that people’s view of God is what is at stake on Sunday mornings, then the most effective way of sharpening their view of God is to show them Jesus. Jesus is most clearly revealed in the Word through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Scriptures provide us with the never-ending well of truth from which we can celebrate and express our worship, love, and thanks to Christ our King. When we see Jesus clearly, through the lens of his Word in the power of the Spirit, we worship him more fully.

O Lord, incline our hearts to your Word. Open our eyes that we may behold wonderful things from your Word. Help us

to trust Your word as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.¹¹

¹¹ Adapted from John Piper's prayer in his article "How to Read the Bible for Yourself," March 17, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-read-the-bible-for-yourself>.