

# *9 Marks of a Healthy Worship Leader*

by **Alex Duke August 4, 2015**

My local church is in search of a worship leader.[1] To that end, our senior pastor cobbled together a group of twelve members for a Worship Leader Search Committee. Despite my musical ineptitude, I was among those asked to serve.

I suppose I'm equal parts grateful and terrified. After all, the title "worship leader" is nowhere in the New Testament. This fact tempts even the most levelheaded toward the subjective and superficial, where already drawn lines and white-knuckled commitments merely evidence what we've previously seen, known, or been comfortable with.

So I wanted to pass along a few thoughts I've developed as I've prayed through what my church is undertaking in the coming weeks, and what your church may be going through right now. I've unoriginally titled them "Nine Marks of a Healthy Worship Leader."

I'm convinced these nine things are must-haves for anyone leading a congregation in song week after week. Far from exhaustive, they are a set of traits, postures, and characteristics I believe are informed by Scripture and ought to transcend culture and denomination.

## **1. Your worship leader should meet the biblical qualifications of an elder.**

This is important. Even if he won't be called an elder, the congregation will likely treat him like one. And it's important to remember the qualifications for an elder/pastor/shepherd include being "apt to teach." This is what worship leaders do, and their aptness to teach (or lack thereof) is evident every week in the songs they select and the way they facilitate the congregation's worship.

I need to add a caveat here. Depending on what song-leading looks like in your particular congregation, meeting the qualifications of an elder may be unnecessary. A friend of mine helpfully pushed back on this point and offered a helpful distinction: "A person who is simply leading musically needs to have the biblical qualifications of a deacon/deaconess. A person who is leading that portion of the service which includes songs, prayers, and readings needs to have the qualifications of an elder." I agree, under the assumption this second scenario naturally propels the "song leader" or what have you into a more pastoral function.

## **2. Your worship leader should be musically capable.**

This is obvious, I know. Perhaps a more specific and helpful exhortation would be that he should select songs within his skill set. You really love that new riff on that old hymn? Yeah, me too, but it's hard to sing along when I can't decipher the words or melody as easily as I can the oh-boy-gotta-catch-up look in the drummer's and rhythm guitarist's eyes.

Also, it's unwise to let this qualification steer the ship; in fact, it should be subservient to almost everything else. A godly and mediocre musician will serve our churches far better in the long run than a sublime talent who reads his chord charts more than his Bible.

### **3. Your worship leader should be invisible (almost).**

A guest leaving the Sunday gathering should be more struck by the corporate witness of the congregation praising God in song than by the ability or presence of one man. “Whoa, those people love to sing about Jesus!” is always better than “Man, that guy is great!”

### **4. Your worship leader should be committed to gospel-anchored liturgy.**

I’m using “liturgy” in a general sense, as in the “flow” of the gathering, not a rote, recited form of standing and sitting and singing that must be repeated weekly. Every church gathering follows some kind of liturgy; the question is whether it reflects the character of the God and the content of the gospel or just the “whatever strikes us” approach.

Anchoring liturgy in the gospel may mean scripted transitions between songs that help to move the congregation through the service. Scripture readings, prayers, testimonies of God’s grace tethered to the theme of the passage about to be preached—all of these till the hearts and minds of those present. Prayerful, thoughtful preparation beforehand cultivates an appropriately intentional culture in a church. Don’t assume the Holy Spirit only works “in the moment.”

### **5. Your worship leader should work in close tandem with the preacher.**

The worship leader doesn’t make decisions on an island. Every song should be in service of the preached Word. This reminds the church of an important truth: the preacher is a worship leader, too. One worships God no less through hearing a sermon than through signing a song.

This isn’t to say the themes of the sermon and the songs must be identical in a narrow sense. But if, say, your pastor is preaching on the resurrection, sing songs which unpack the meaning of that event as opposed to songs that refer to God’s goodness in his general interactions with his people. The latter is a more-than-worthy topic, of course, but the resurrection is a specific event that reveals specific things about God and us. This kind of cooperation between song and sermon provides an opportunity to praise God specifically and uniquely in response to his revelation.

### **6. Your worship leader should be committed to the expression of a vast range of emotions.**

Every Sunday gathering should have moments of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, celebration, and the like. The church should be a space where a range of emotions are acceptable: guilt, shame, sadness, joy, thankfulness, and so on. When we only sing upbeat songs about how happy we are to be in the house of the Lord, or how we’re going to serve our guts out this next week because Jesus is awesome, we tacitly teach people that feeling sad or guilty or downtrodden is somehow sub-Christian, a posture unfit for praising God.

There are many songs that extol Jesus while also being honest about feeling sorrow and pain. I’ll never forget singing “*Be Still My Soul*” a few days after hearing of a friend’s terminal cancer diagnosis. Though somber and designed to elicit emotions perhaps few present were feeling, this song hoisted me into the loving arms of Jesus. Can happy songs can do that, too? Of course. But when there’s never any seasoning of sorrow in our gatherings we risk broadcasting a counterfeit, sub-Christian message about what it means to be a human pursuing Christlikeness in a fallen

world. We're communicating to both our members and our visitors that Christians are always happy and that a relationship with Christ eradicates grief. We're setting people up for disappointment or unpreparedness in the face of difficulty.

### **7. Your worship leader should be committed to the explicit worship of Jesus.**

This is less about the tone and more about the words of certain songs. The vast majority of a church's music must be distinctly Christian—exalting not only the characteristics of God but the truths of the gospel. We should sing few songs an unconverted Jew could happily sing—that is, we should sing about Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Words like "sin" and "gospel" and "cross" should come up frequently and perhaps even be explained for those in attendance who, frankly, don't know the difference between a Baptist church and a Jewish synagogue. Assuming all present are Christians and know what words mean is a recipe for confusion.

### **8. Your worship leader should encourage and enlist congregational participation.**

In addition to encouraging loud congregational singing, the worship leader could also ask various church members to pray during the service. This provides opportunities for visibility and participation for many, not just the few with musical talent.

### **9. Your worship leader should be chiefly concerned with honoring God and upholding Jesus and the gospel, more than reaching the next generation or any other pre-determined demographic.**

Every church needs to be culturally informed (this is why you likely avoid African tribal songs), but no church should be culturally driven. If conversations about fruitfulness begin displacing those about faithfulness, then the first step has been taken toward a mindset of man-centered worship that will need updating in a few short years.

Apart from Christ, every generation from the root of Adam is dead in their sins, in desperate need of the enlivening words of Christ. Because of this, after leaving your church on Sunday, no one needs to think to themselves, "Man, that music was great!" More than anything, they need to have heard the gospel clearly and explicitly; they need to have been made aware of their dire situation apart from Christ and—even more—his held-out hand as their all-sufficient and ever-gracious Savior.

*[1] The parlance for this kind of job is amorphous: music minister, pastor of music, pastor of music and arts, director of contemporary arena jamz and the occasional traditional dirge, defense against the dark arts teacher, etc. I'm only using "worship leader" since it seems to me a catch-all.*

*Previously published at the [9Marks blog](#).*