



THE
Dwell Richly
COURSE

leading others in singing the gospel

3. THE FAITHFUL LEADER

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3. The Faithful Leader

*So guide me, call me, draw me,
Uphold me to the end,
And on that Day receive me,
My Saviour and my friend.¹*

Intro

We have now laid the foundations of what it means to be worshippers of God, and seen how gathering to sing can be a part of that. As musicians and music leaders we lead spiritually by helping people behold Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18) through congregational singing, so His word dwells richly in them. All our practical leadership of preparing and leading music flows out of that aim, and we'll explore that in sections 4 and 5.

But how can we evaluate if we're being faithful to our calling? What does it mean to be a faithful leader, and how can we make sure we are faithful leaders?

Concrete outcomes vs. spiritual realities

As we strive to serve people well, we can end up evaluating our ministries solely on the basis of visible and concrete outcomes rather than unseen spiritual realities. Our focus quickly shifts from helping people behold Christ onto *how well* we are helping others behold Christ. John Piper puts it this way:

If the focus shifts onto our giving to God, one result I have seen again and again is that subtly it is not God that remains at the center, but the quality of our giving. Are we singing worthily of the Lord? Are our instrumentalists playing with quality fitting a gift to the Lord? Is the preaching a suitable offering to the Lord? And little by little the focus shifts off the utter indispensability of the Lord himself onto the quality of our performances. And we even start to define excellence and power in worship in terms of the technical distinction of our artistic acts.²

Our focus as music leaders can shift from whether people were helped to behold Christ, and whether we faithfully ministered His word, onto how good the band sounded or how well people responded.

¹ John Earnest Bode, "O Jesus I Have Promised". This version by Larry Olsworth-Peter © Christ Church Mayfair 2018, all rights reserved.

² John Piper, Brothers, We are Not Professionals. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 265.

It's so easy to slip into evaluating our ministry exclusively in terms of these concrete, measurable outcomes rather than the spiritual realities behind them. If we pursue "success" in those areas, we'll neglect the spiritual need of those we lead – to behold Christ in the gospel as we sing. We'll lose sight of God's call to faithful leadership.

We ourselves will either tend towards pride when we meet our criteria for success, or to despair when we fail. Our focus on these concrete things will cause us to lose sight of the gospel we sing about.

But as we remember again the gospel, we find a secure identity, not based on our ministry "performance", but on God's free gift of salvation to us in Christ! As we're reminded of all that Jesus has done for us, any pride in us is humbled to see the cost of that salvation – the death of the Son of God. And we're called out of despair and into the loving arms of our Father in Heaven, who out of His great love for us gave His Son to save us!

We respond to the gospel in faithfulness. Standing secure in our identity in Christ, we are free to serve, not simply pursuing success in areas we can quantify, but seeking the spiritual good of those we lead.

Let's think about some ways we might be tempted to pursue success, see the dangers of each one, then see how the gospel recalibrates our thinking and helps us to serve faithfully...

1. 'Success' is... musical skill?

Last Sunday, Steve had a shocker. Half the band didn't turn up or arrived late. Despite his preparation, the rehearsal was tense and stressful. He had to restart the second song because he left his capo on, and he forgot how the bridge in the new song went. People seemed bewildered and didn't know when to come in. In his own eyes, he'd completely failed, which left him feeling pretty useless. The anonymous note (containing some strong feedback) that was left on his music stand later that week made it ten times worse. Especially considering how well Monica had led the week before...

Monica had felt particularly pleased with the previous Sunday. The whole thing went off without a hitch. The band nailed the big musical transition she wrote. People seemed to respond well to her arrangements and leading, the singing was thunderously loud and plenty of people came up to her at the end to say

how much they love the way she leads. Monica was delighted with how she had served. She's so thankful that she faithfully invested in her skills and she's confident that people will keep responding well to her leading.

You've probably seen both of these scenarios before – maybe they've been you! When this happens, do we simply evaluate ourselves on our musical skill?

The importance of musical skill

As well as being commanded in Scripture to “play skilfully” (Psalm 33:3), musical skill helps us in our aim to let the word dwell richly in hearts and minds. Skill helps us not to distract people from the truths we sing with poor quality music. Skill is not unrelated to the aim that people behold Christ through His word as we sing. A musical mess stops that from happening. Skilful leadership brings clarity and helps people know when to come in, so they're focused on the truths they're singing about. Skilfully led music can help draw our attention to the truth about Christ as we sing.

The dangers of “success = skill”

When we evaluate our ministry purely on the basis of musical skill, it leads to ugly things in our hearts. If people affirm us, we'll be tempted to feel proud that our efforts have been significant; if we receive negative feedback, it could crush us. We can end up comparing ourselves to others, leaving us either feeling proud or left in despair, depending on how we rank ourselves.

If skill is all that matters, those of us who are beginner or amateur musicians will end up feeling less valuable when compared to others. And those who are more accomplished will be tempted to “wing it” rather than faithfully preparing. There is also a great temptation to look down on others with less experience or ability. And perhaps most dangerously, we'll begin to equate our musical skill with the congregation seeing and savouring Christ. That puts the power in our hands.

By focusing on musical skill rather than on Jesus, we are taken further from our calling of helping people behold Christ as we help His word dwell in them. The problem is, we can execute creative arrangements with amazing musical precision and skill and *still* be unfaithful leaders. God tells His people in Scripture that he hates music made by hearts that are far from Him, no matter how good it sounds (Isaiah 29:13; Amos 5:23-24). So as well as leading us to pride or despair, evaluating our ministry on the basis of how good or bad the music sounds can

actually distract us from what God is truly calling us to.

A reminder: God is pleased with us in Christ

The gospel reminds us that we don't find our identity in our musical ability but in being made children of God in Christ. The Father's love for us isn't founded upon our musical ability, or any other good thing we do, but because we are in Christ.

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

What were we like before we knew Christ (v1-3)?

What did we deserve (v3)?

But what has God done for us (v4)?

No amount of musical skill or fervent praise could ever bring us favour with God. It's only in Christ that we know God's favour:

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. – Ephesians 2:8-9

In Christ, we have God's favour secured forever! We have "every spiritual blessing in Christ"; our Father has "lavished on us" His grace as a free gift (Ephesians 1:3, 8). God doesn't delight in us because of our abilities (that He gave us anyway), but because we're united to His Son through His gift of grace. In fact, no offering of worship we bring to God could ever be acceptable to Him apart from Christ's finished sacrifice and on-going work as High Priest to perfect it (Hebrews 10:19-25)!

Our response: faithful leaders who point to Christ

Ephesians 2:10 tells us to respond to such grace by doing the "good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do" – one of those works is helping people behold Christ as we sing the gospel.

With our identity in Christ secure, we can be faithful leaders even if we're not the most skilled musicians in the world. We can use the skills we do have to help God's word dwell richly in the hearts and minds of those we lead. And we have an even stronger motivation to put in the practice time on our instrument or voice – not to earn God's favour – but in response to knowing we already have His favour as a free gift in Christ.

When things do go wrong, or when we receive negative feedback, we won't be

crushed and fall into despair. We know the Father's love is secure in Christ – not dependant on our musical "performance". That will help us to be faithful leaders, showing patience with musicians who make mistakes, and gently encouraging them to keep working on their skills, so that they can better help the word of Christ dwell richly in others.

And when things go well, and people praise us, we can be humbled and thankful that God would take those who deserve His wrath, make them alive in Christ by grace, and give them the skills and opportunities to serve as free gifts! That will help us to be faithful leaders who don't rest on their musical skill to get by, but use their gifts to help those they lead by pointing them to Christ. And, secure in His favour, we won't put others down to build ourselves up, but encourage and equip less experienced leaders to serve.

Whether things go to plan or not, the gospel frees us to be faithful leaders as we behold Christ in the gospel, and help others to do the same.

2. 'Success' is... stirring a reaction?

When James watches videos of his favourite worship songs on YouTube, he's excited and encouraged by the response of the people being led. Everyone seems to be singing like they really mean it! It seems obvious what's going on in their hearts because of how they respond.

And yet, as he stands up to lead on Sunday morning at his local church, he gets discouraged as he's met with a sea of blank expressions. He concludes that those who respond visibly are the ones who are engaged inwardly, and others must be too exhausted, distracted, or sinful to focus properly! He starts wondering what he could do to get people to respond like they do in the video.

The dangers of manufacturing response

In our longing to see people being shaped and changed by God's word, we can be discouraged when people seem indifferent to the truths we sing. It can be hard to judge what's going on spiritually, and so we often rely on concrete things to indicate what's happening in people's hearts and minds. Leading can feel draining emotionally and spiritually. We may even grow bitter towards those we lead and attempt to provoke a reaction from them.

On the other hand, we can feel elated when people appear to respond well. We might consider if it's because of anything we did, and we may be tempted to

chase the high of that experience again.

If we evaluate the 'success' of our ministry on the basis of how people respond visibly and outwardly, we'll be tempted to manufacture a visible response rather than humbly model an authentic response to the gospel. Rather than focusing on the truth of the gospel as we sing, we'll focus on their *response to those truths*. We may end up going with what 'works' to provoke a certain reaction we associate with genuine engagement, rather than letting the gospel dwell richly in people. That could undermine the assurance of those we lead when it doesn't 'work' for them.

We'll stand or fall on issues such as how many hands are in the air, making us feel secure and affirmed when people engage 'well' (leading again to pride), and leaving us feeling insecure when they don't (leading us to despair at our own inadequacies, or those of other musicians and technicians).

But as we've seen, we can honour God outwardly and be completely devoid of that attitude of adoration in our hearts. We can cause people to display an outward response and *not* be a faithful leader.

A reminder: The Spirit *is* transforming lives

God promises that the Holy Spirit is transforming the people of God into the likeness of Jesus as we behold Him. As we saw in section one, the Holy Spirit shows us Christ and ministers to our hearts and minds through the truth of God's word in our songs:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory [revealed in Christ, 4:6], are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. – 2 Corinthians 3:18

The Holy Spirit is causing God's word to bear diverse fruit in our lives as a result of beholding Christ as we sing. Struggling saints are strengthened, the broken-hearted are comforted and lost sheep are brought into the fold of the Good Shepherd!

This spiritual reality won't always be manifested in a visible and concrete outward response. But we will see the fruit of the Spirit in lives of worship: faithful marriages, godly families, faithful witnesses at work, home and school, lives shared in gospel community – God's people living lives devoted to His glory.

This frees us from thinking it's our responsibility to transform people, or provoke a particular response. We trust God is at work! As David Peterson says:

God's ability to minister to us in a gathering does not depend on the intensity of our singing, the degree of our enthusiasm or the style of our music³

... and we could add the skill of the music leader. Trusting the Spirit's work frees us from manufacturing a response.

We respond: faithful leaders setting forth truth

Read 2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6

Given that this is the Spirit's work, what encouragements does Paul give to the church?

What does Paul choose to do? And not do?

We may feel weak and inadequate as we lead, but, confident of the Spirit's work, "we do not lose heart". Although what we do as leaders can help or hinder people's engagement with the gospel, it's not ultimately down to us – the Spirit is transforming lives. That means we're free – even in our weaknesses and inadequacies – to faithfully help others behold Him as we sing.

We do that as we craft arrangements that adorn the words with music, which complements and accompanies. We won't "distort the word of God" with music designed to move people emotionally in a way that's separated from the truth they're singing about. We'll "[set] forth the truth plainly", proclaiming the gospel through our songs.

Finally, trusting the Spirit is transforming us into Christ's likeness as we behold Him, we'll be expectant of His work and we'll faithfully respond to the truths we sing in an authentic way. We'll model outwardly inward thankfulness, beholding Christ and engaging faithfully ourselves with the gospel. We'll encourage our congregation to do the same: not manufacturing a response, but seeking to help them respond to the gospel as they sing. Secure in the Spirit's work, we can faithfully help others behold Christ, knowing He really is changing us into Christ's likeness.

³ David Peterson, *Encountering God Together*, p.129.

Whether our church is more outwardly expressive or more reserved, we can be faithful leaders by helping hearts and minds behold Christ, and trusting the Spirit's work to transform us into Christ's likeness.

“Beholders leading beholders”

How can we ensure we remember these truths and remain faithful servants of Christ? Before we call others to behold Christ, we must first be ‘beholders’ of Christ ourselves. Knowing Christ deeply, and reminding ourselves daily of His character and work displayed in the gospel is the lifeblood of our ministry – and our lives.

How can we lead others to respond in worship to God's glory when we ourselves aren't doing the same? How can we help others know the bitterness of sin unless we have wept over our own? How can we help others experience the joy of forgiveness when we don't celebrate it ourselves? How can we call weary disciples to again take up their cross in response to His mercy if we ourselves don't do battle in our hearts each day to respond to grace by living for His glory? How will we lead others to taste the eternal joy to come when our spiritual taste-buds are dulled by the meagre offerings of this life?

Some weeks we will stand up and feel spiritually dry. We may not even feel like engaging with the truth of the gospel ourselves. We might be painfully aware of our own sin, feeling battered by life in a broken world, or just feeling distant from God. Even in those moments, we can behold Christ by looking to Him for faith to trust the truths we sing and strength to lead others to do the same. God doesn't ask us to be a perfect Christian oozing strength and confidence every time we lead. He calls us as unimpressive, fragile “jars of clay” to first of all behold His glory in His Son in the gospel, and then to help others see Him too.

As we immerse ourselves in the glorious truth of this gospel, then our hearts and minds will be re-focused onto Him, and our ministry will be informed and shaped by these gospel principles. Our prayerful leading will foster a dependence on God, through which we'll lean on His good, gospel promises. Delving deeply into His word will re-condition our minds and hearts and help us fight for faith when tempted to despair or pride. Standing in community with others in our church family will help us lead sensitively and spur us on to faithfully present Christ as we sing. Before we lead others to behold Christ, we must first behold Him. And what a privilege that is.

Questions

- Can you think of a time where you've felt despair or pride after leading? What caused you to feel that way?
- How will knowing God's love and verdict on you at the cross help you next time you lead?
- Have you been discouraged by the way people respond in the singing? In what ways have you been tempted to use music to provoke a certain response?
- How will remembering the Spirit's faithful work help you next time you lead?
- What other struggles do you feel as you lead? How might the gospel re-focus your thinking?

Things to read and listen to

1. John Hindley, *Serving Without Sinking*⁴

⁴ (Croydon: The Good Book Company, 2013)

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