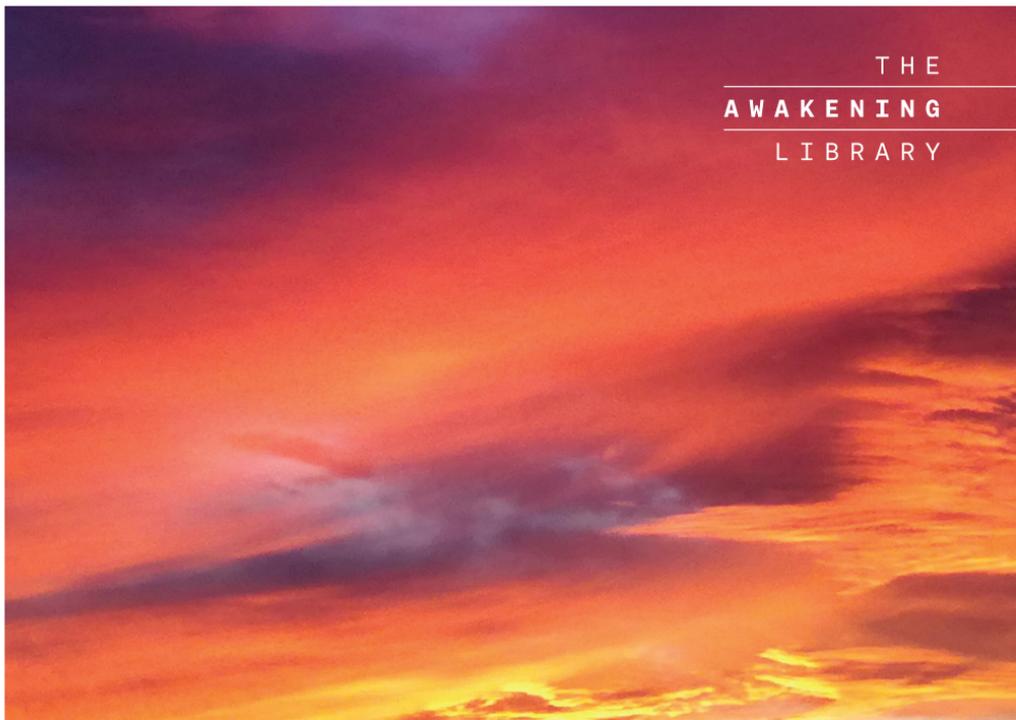


How to Lead Worship for Encounter with Jesus

THE
AWAKENING
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Why We Need Awakening

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How to Lead Worship for Encounter with Jesus

How to Develop Leadership Culture for Awakening

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That Sustain Awakening

How to Lead Worship for Encounter with Jesus

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The Awakening Library represents collected learnings from more than a decade of ministry as Seedbed and New Room. These pieces have been contributed by writers, leaders, and practitioners in fellowship with the goal of providing practical insights for individuals and churches desiring awakening—an encounter with God that both results from and leads to deep wholeness in people, renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and transformation of society.

With special thanks to Dan Wilt for his contribution to this resource, as well as the worship leaders of New Room, the Asbury Outpouring, and Altars for their insights.

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INTRODUCTION

“Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Eph. 5:19–20)

Awakening movements have always been marked by honest encounters with the presence of Jesus—nurtured by songs of adoring worship.

Worship is an expansive topic that includes all the worship expressions of the body of Christ throughout history—from our most liturgical worship expressions to the most contemporary musical worship expressions of today.

INTRODUCTION

Our focus here, on leading worship for an encounter with Jesus, will be primarily on the contemporary musical worship expressions common to many churches today, and on those environments in which the singing of the songs of worship creates a space for *lingering in the presence of God*—in thanksgiving, adoration, prayer, ministry, surrender, and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to lead worship for an encounter with Jesus today? Are there principles or best practices that can help worship leaders in any tradition move beyond mere worship performance, beyond even leading great worship music and sincere, enthusiastic sets—into truly leading a room full of expectant believers into an experience of the presence of Jesus? Said another way, what does it mean to lead worship for *awakening*—an awakening of hearts, homes, churches, and cities—to the person and presence of Jesus?

LEADING WORSHIP FOR AWAKENING

The following definition of awakening has guided our vision of worship for many years: *Awakening is the outcome of personally encountering Jesus Christ, through whom the love of God the Father is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Awakening both results from and leads to deep wholeness in people, renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and transformation of society.*

Worship leaders who lean into this vision of awakening are needed now more than ever. We believe worship leaders *can learn* to lead worship in such a way that helps followers of Jesus, as individuals and as communities, to experience the presence of God, be discipled into Christ, and posture themselves for awakening.

To understand how, we must consider where we are today in worship, and then what principles and best practices can help us lead worship for an encounter with Jesus.

TODAY'S WORSHIP LEADER

Today's worship leader is surrounded by a wide range of leadership teaching that is helpful and often centers primarily around ideas like personal devotion, skill-building, leadership development, songwriting, arranging, and pastoral skills for congregational ministry.

Today's worship leader is also influenced in person and online by the worship music industry. In that industry, worship leader role models may indeed be faithful saints and loving followers of Jesus, but may also be elevated in popularity by a heavy focus on marketing and an emphasis on public image (leading people to treat them as celebrities). Designing worship for digital spaces and social media has

contributed to the elevation of personalities and worship brands as well.

Could it be that there is an essential worship training component that is deemphasized (or is even absent) in today's worship leader training: training worship leaders to focus their worship leadership on lingering in ministry to Jesus in both the hidden and public places?

What if this missing training element is the key to leading worship for an encounter with Jesus in the local church?

CASE STUDY : LESSONS FROM THE ASBURY OUTPOURING

To consider this question, and to offer fresh ideas on how we can lead worship in a way that enables a community to regularly have a rich experience of the presence of God in worship, we collected learnings from worship leaders who have decades of experience leading worship in a wide-range of presence-of-God-oriented environments, as well as from our New Room experiences, our Asbury Outpouring experience, and other gatherings over the years.

A case study of a recent worship inflection point that touched the world can help us reflect well on what it means to lead worship for an encounter with Jesus, and for awakening.

In February of 2023, a holy disruption occurred in today's worship landscape—known as the “Asbury Outpouring” at Asbury University. The school sits in the small town of Wilmore, Kentucky, in the United States. With musical worship stirring at the center of an encounter with Jesus that lasted sixteen days, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit rapidly touched tens of thousands in person and millions around the world online. Worship leaders globally were deeply touched by what they saw, and individuals in today's worship music industry were impacted as well.

What the world saw was both unique and remarkable in today's worship milieu. Simple and unrefined expressions of worship, led by young, college-aged leaders and teams, brought millions of Christians around the world—including many worship leaders—to a renewed experience of Christ-centered worship.

Here are just a few of the characteristics of worship in the Asbury Outpouring from which we can learn:

LINGERING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

There was a theology of lingering in the presence of God that emerged in the Asbury Outpouring. The times of worship were unrushed and spacious. Worship seemed to be a bonfire around which tens of thousands were gathering to linger in the presence of God. Even on the front lawns of the university, in overflow chapels and spaces, and on campuses across the country, people lingered in singing,

in silence, in times of prayer and instrumental worship, in listening to the Word of God spoken, in kneeling at the altar, in sharing testimonies and more.

When a person walked into Hughes Auditorium, the primary gathering place for the students and tens of thousands coming to Wilmore, there was an unmistakable experience to which many have testified: *one could almost palpably feel the presence of God in the room, and time was given to linger in that place of encounter.*

The phrase, “We love God’s presence; everything good can happen in his presence,” expressed the perspective of many of those leading during those two weeks. Thousands streamed to the altar during times of lingering worship, eager to be set free from bondages of the heart, healed in spirit, mind, and body, and to confess sin—overcome by a desire to remove any impediment between them and the Father’s loving presence.

MINISTRY TO JESUS AS THE FOCUS OF WORSHIP

The young worship leaders in the Asbury Outpouring led from a simple stage in Hughes Auditorium on the campus of the university, with the words, “Holiness unto the Lord” written high on the wood backdrop behind them. Their testimonies confirm that they saw their primary ministry in worship as being to *Jesus*—not to the *people* pouring through the doors. In other words, they seemed to be less self-aware,

or aware of the crowds they were leading, than they were of God's presence. They were leading worship to minister to *Jesus*.

Put another way, ministry to the Lord in worship (singing to Jesus and responding to his loving presence), and ministry to those gathered for worship (discipleship and formation, executing the songs well, making sure excellent sound and clear words were provided), were set in some level of contrast with one another. With no words on screens and an intentionally limited focus on production, these young worship leaders considered their primary worship ministry to be adoring Jesus and leading others into the loving presence of God in the room.

CONSECRATION TO JESUS BEFORE LEADING

These young worship leaders would spend up to an hour before leading hidden away in a back room, experiencing times of *consecration*—or being “set apart”—as lead worshipers. They joined with others in a prayer room, away from the stage, to worship, to surrender themselves to God's purposes, to release fear, anxiety, and ego, and to both confess and shed any sin or self-focused goals—all before they stepped onto a stage.

Seeing their role as priestly, in the spirit of the priests who ministered before the Lord day and night in the temple under David's guidance (1 Chron. 9:33) and the royal priesthood of the New Testament (1 Peter 2:9),

these worship leaders and musicians were not willing to step onto a platform with issues of the heart undealt with. The “consecration room” was an innovation that emerged in the Asbury Outpouring—and its impact on the dynamics of worship throughout the gatherings cannot be overstated.

SIMPLICITY AND COMMUNITY IN WORSHIP

When the worship leaders came onto the stage, there were no lights, no screens, and no introductions that would be intrusive to the flow of worship. As the room buzzed with prayer at the altar with an attitude of worship sustained by the community in the room, it was sometimes hard to notice transitions between teams. Sweet and unassuming anonymity was maintained among the leaders, keeping the times of worship feeling as if the congregation had a major role to play in the experience.

The musicians would begin to play their instruments as those present lifted their voices. At times, one could not tell who was leading—the worship leader or the gathered faithful. Worship was often led with just an acoustic guitar, a piano, a percussion instrument, and a voice or two. In some sessions, dozens of students piled onto the stage to worship, erasing the imagined line between the musicians and the worshippers filling the floor and balcony of the auditorium. The communal sense of worship in the space was high and remarkably engaging.

SONGS ACCLAIMING THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

The songs chosen were familiar (at least to many who were there), God-focused, and from a curated set list prayed over by those overseeing the worship. No lyrics appeared anywhere. Songs were selected, intentionally, to keep Jesus the center of attention and to worship him lavishly for his goodness, worthiness, and love.

The voices in the room, from many places and denominations, roared in praise and acclaim of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—occasionally drowning out the music and effectively leading the worship. People picked up on the words as they went along, or just worshipped with the sound of the family of God around them, drawing out their worship.

RADICAL HUMILITY

Those overseeing worship in Hughes Auditorium would often look over the crowd and, sensing the Lord speaking to them about a particular young person, invite that young person to join the team (in some cases without knowing if they had any musical ability). The heart was prioritized as the most important instrument of worship leadership on the stage.

The leaders of the gathering carried themselves as humble and hidden, as did the worship leaders. This radical humility set a tone in the room. One could almost hear idols of Christian celebrity culture falling to the ground as a deep

sense of being one body in worship enveloped the space. Well-known guests were invited to just sit in worship, come to the altar, and to take it all in. And they did, often sharing about their transformative experiences afterward.

A LACK OF “SHOW”

Without special lighting, lyrics on screens, or high production, there was an ease and community sense to the times of worship that contrasted with many more performative expressions of worship existing in the church today.

Some of the worship leaders would even lead worship to an empty room in between sessions, knowing Jesus was there to be ministered to even when people were not. The music was often rough and raw, yet pure and from the heart. Livestream cameras were turned off, by request. Phones were often left on seats or in pockets. People worshipped. They had not come for a show; they had come to encounter the presence of Jesus moving among his people.

A MULTIPLICITY OF LEADERSHIP

Worship leaders were many in this environment, and shared the responsibilities of leading worship—often for hours on end—in the various venues on the campus. The worship leaders were diverse in a variety of ways, including denominationally, ethnically, and stylistically. But the shared attention to ministry to Jesus in worship set the tone for everything from how relationships were handled (teams

happily deferred to one another), all the way to how songs were prayerfully chosen and led.

No one person carried the room or the load—there was unity in the diversity of leaders.

A UNIFIED AND CHRIST-CENTERED ROOM

With thousands pouring in from the Kentucky countryside, from neighboring states, and from around the world, the denominational representation was high. The unity in the times of musical worship was profound. A few of those remarkable moments made their way onto social media through short clips (people were encouraged to be present to the presence of God in the room rather than to social media), and the rest is history.

HOW TO LEAD WORSHIP FOR ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

What happened at Asbury did not happen in isolation, nor are these themes completely new to the body of Christ across history. In fact, what happened in those days may have been a sign, a marker, of what the Father is wanting to renew in worship in our time.

Three integrating principles about worship, drawn from our learnings and insights from the Asbury Outpouring, provide a framework for best practices that can help us as worship leaders to more effectively lead worship for an encounter with Jesus.

Let's look at these three principles, and some best practices that emerge from them.

PRINCIPLE 1—WORSHIP IS A RESPONSE

Worship is, first and foremost, a response to the person and presence of God (1 John 4:19). Responding to the presence of Jesus in the room is our number-one priority. Jesus takes the initiative to reveal himself to us by the Holy Spirit, and as we sing and pray we turn our attention to him in surrender, thanks, praise, and adoration. We join in the Trinitarian love that is shared between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We experience in worship the actualizing, the realizing, of our union with God in Christ (1 Cor. 1:30).

What happens on a stage, on a platform, in a living room, or in a hospital room, in worship, is *to, for, and before* the Lord. The rest of us get to join in the encounter. In that encounter, thoughtfully led, we are being discipled as Christians who are sensitive to the movements of God's Spirit. To say that worship ministry is primarily a response to the Lord's presence is not to diminish our understanding of worship as ministry to people in fellowship, discipleship, formation, engaging with Scripture, receiving the bread and the cup, and more. Rather, it is to enhance the meaning of worship in a way that transcends, and gives meaning and purpose to, the work of the people in worship.

PRINCIPLE 2—WORSHIP IS MINISTRY TO THE LORD

A worship ministry focused primarily on *ministering to the people* gathered, or the "house" as some call it, may prioritize

providing an effective worship leader, well-known songs, clear presentation of words, great sound, solid arrangements, thoughtful lyrics, top-notch vocalists and musicians, pastoral awareness, and more to enhance the congregation's experience. While each of these elements can lift the dynamics of a worship time, when they are practically valued as the *essence* of effective worship leadership we can unwittingly put human production and artistry in a role it was never designed to fulfill—making the *telos* (end goal) of worship the peoples' experience in worship.

In contrast, a worship ministry focused primarily on *ministering to Jesus* in worship may have some of the elements noted, but reveals a clear prioritization of inviting the hearts of those present to respond to the *presence of God*—opening those gathered to the Spirit's covenant-keeping presence through songs of adoration and praise. A worship leader, worshipping and effectively leading at the same time, is ministering to the Lord in worship, and leading the congregation toward greater union with Christ by extension.

PRINCIPLE 3—WORSHIP LEADERSHIP IS LEARNED IN THE SECRET PLACE

If a worship leader is ministering to the Lord in private, ongoing, extended times of intimate communion, with their instrument in hand, then they will be ready to minister to the Lord in worship in public. If, on the other hand, that is not the case, worship leaders will inadvertently make

worship leadership about themselves, the congregation, and the energy of the experience. They may do this not because of impure or misguided motives, but rather because public ministry seems easier, more predictable, and more attainable than cultivating a rich life of intimacy with Jesus when no one is looking.

Said more strongly, the “secret place” life of the worship leader (Ps. 91:1 NKJV) is the foundation for one’s public leadership of worship. Enthusiasm and passion are no replacement for a rich, cultivated hidden life of worship. What is real behind a closed door is real in an empty or packed room. A public life of worship leadership that is not growing in the soil of a private life of encounter with Jesus will ring hollow over time.

Spiritual authority in worship leadership is not developed on a stage; it is gained in the secret place.

BEST PRACTICES FOR AWAKENING WORSHIP LEADERS

With these principles in mind, let's explore a few best practices for leading worship for an encounter with Jesus. Again, these are drawn from our experience, and from many worship leaders who have experienced outpourings of the Spirit in recent times.

1. BEFORE WE LEAD WORSHIP

A worship leader who has prioritized their private life of worship before their public leadership of worship, who has determined to prioritize ministry to the Lord in worship before ministry to the congregation, is operating from the mindset of a royal priest (1 Peter 2:9).

Put Consecration Ahead of Preparation

If we want to lead worship that prioritizes an ongoing experience of God's presence, then the leader's heart must be set apart for that purpose as well. Consecration means that we are "set apart" to do the work of worship leading. We are lingering in God's presence personally, and with others, and in that place of surrender and hidden worship we grow in spiritual authority.

The principle of a consecration room can be applied in a local church. Before leading worship, worship leaders and musicians can gather for an extended time in a back room, thirty minutes to an hour before leading, not only to pray for the worship time and congregation, but also to surrender ego, confess sin, release fear and anxiety, receive prayer, worship together, reconcile in relationships, refocus on ministering to Jesus in worship, and unburden their hearts of any spiritual weights or disordered desires they are bringing to their moment.

Worship leaders can also spend two to three hours per week leading to an empty room, just leading worship to Jesus. This secret-place practice can keep us centered on our highest calling in ministry.

Put Character Ahead of Capability

Worship leaders who are confident in their ability to lead, in their ability to arrange the band, pick the songs, execute the set, deliver great music, and engage the congregation, can glitter in the eyes of many churches and leaders. But we have

all seen the destruction in local churches that has occurred when a local church values a leader's age, energy, enthusiasm, and skill above their hidden character—the character of Christ flourishing in them when no one is looking.

Worship leaders must be people who cultivate intimacy with Jesus, integrity, radical humility, a love for the hidden place, attentive care for others including care for one's spouse, children, and other close relationships, compassionate candor, wisdom, teachability, vulnerability, banded relationships (see discipleshipbands.com), love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Additionally, pastoral and sacrificial demeanor toward one's teams, tenderness and sensitivity to the Lord's presence, and musical, team-building, and administrative skills are essential.

Engage Many Leaders, Serving Together

It has been normalized in our time to make small or big time celebrities out of local worship leaders. In this case, some worship leaders can “over-own” the platform on which they lead. Training and releasing a multiplicity of worship leaders who can lead from their secret life of worship heals the body of Christ from our tendency to over-value personalities. With humility, we can train intentionally and create environments engaging multiple leaders, each leading with different gifts and approaches, making space for the diversity of gifts noted in 1 Corinthians 12 to serve the good of the community.

2. AS WE LEAD WORSHIP

When a worship leader and team prioritizes ministry to Jesus in worship, then the gathering of people, over time, may engage in the same way. As we lead worship, we can experience what one worship leader called a “unified room”—a small or large group of people in complete unity as Jesus is worshipped as the worthy King of kings and Lord of lords that he is.

Minister to Jesus in an Unrushed, Lingering Worship Space

While not all Sunday morning contexts afford time for lingering long in times of worship, worship leaders can create alternative worship environments where the people of God can take ample time and space to minister to Jesus in worship, kneel at an altar during or after worship, surrender themselves in thanksgiving, receive healing, repent of sin, receive prayer, and experience a place of relative peace in a hurried and relentless world.

Creating spacious environments for extended times of worship, prayer, and ministry may be a priority task for many of us as worship leaders today. It’s important to remember here that while there is nothing inherently wrong with having a big band and amazing arrangements, we must remember that the music does not play the central role in worship—the heart does. Let the principle of simplicity lead the way when creating a space for your congregation to engage with God in worship.

Primarily Choose Familiar Songs That Acclaim the Father, the Son, and the Spirit

When phrases like “Holy, holy, holy,” and “Worthy, worthy, worthy,” dominate the lyrical spirit of our song choices, we are turning our attention to Jesus (Heb. 12:2). Familiarity with the songs being sung in a room can also help people engage more fully in praising God for who he is, opening their hearts to worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

When the songs are focused on acclaiming God for his character, his love, his kindness and goodness to us, our eyes are lifted off of ourselves and we begin to see our circumstances as they are—held in the mighty hands of God. This does not mean we should not use other types of songs; it just means that familiar songs directly blessing the Trinity may need to feature prominently in the set. It is also important to consider the ongoing rehearsing of the story of salvation through our song choices, celebrating God’s timeless work across the ages, rather than simply focusing on his work in our own lives and in our generation.

Be Pastorally Responsive and Communicative

As worship leaders, we need deep development in our pastoral skillset and sensibilities in order to effectively guide worshippers beyond the music and into the presence of God. Being spiritually sensitive and Spirit-responsive, letting the songs lead, only speaking pastorally as necessary (many worship leaders feel a need to fill the space in a worship time with words and guidance), and discerning with other

leaders when opportunities for prayer, silence, healing, repentance, or encouragement present themselves—these are all pastoral approaches to leading that put ministry to Jesus first and revitalize worshippers as they meet with God.

3. AFTER WE LEAD WORSHIP

What happens after we lead worship? For many worship leaders today, there is an unplugging of instruments, a sigh of relief, and perhaps a well-deserved nap! But what if we are short-changing a finishing process that keeps the leader's heart strong and oriented to Jesus, renewed and ready to lead the next worship set?

What if how we step off a platform is as important as how we step onto one?

Give God the Glory

We were not made to carry the accolades of a crowd without offering them to the Lord. He alone receives glory. We can thank people for their affirmation, as it comes from them to us, from the heart, as a blessing. But if we put ourselves in the vulnerable position of receiving then holding on too tightly to personal praise, we lose our way. We can take the time to kneel, offer it all back to God, and receive the humility only his Spirit can give—after every time we lead worship.

Wait on the Lord for Insights about the Leading That Just Happened

For those who have been leading worship for many years, there is often a shared understanding that what we as leaders think was the most important moment in a time of worship may not have been the most important moment to God. If we will pause and notice, after a time of worship, there can be gifts of understanding that help us further lean into what the Father is doing in our community.

Consecrate Yourself to Jesus and Reclaim Your Identity as a Beloved Child

Stages and microphones can quietly affect us over time. When our business card as a child of God is secure, as it was for Jesus in the wilderness as he faced the testing of his identity, we are impervious to the enemy's distortions of our value and worth. A post-worship-leading consecration time is appropriate, even if it is brief, to keep us ministering to Jesus in worship as one of his lifelong worship leaders—and as his beloved child.

CONCLUSION

Leading worship for an encounter with Jesus is an activity marked by more than just the act of leading a congregation in singing songs from a devoted heart. A consecrated worship leader, who is covered, surrendered, and yielded to Jesus, a leader who cares for their heart before, during, and after leading, can play a vital role in the awakening of hearts, homes, churches, and cities in our time.

With these ideas in mind, may you as a worship leader love the presence of God, love the secret place, learn what it means to minister to the Lord in worship, resist small-time celebrity status in your community, invest yourself in a life of intimacy with God, personal discipleship, and lingering prayer—and become the saint Jesus is making you to be.

CONCLUSION

(Special thanks to the worship leaders of New Room, the Asbury Outpouring, and Altars for their contributions to this resource.)

Sow righteousness for yourselves,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;
for it is time to seek the LORD,
until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.

Hosea 10:12

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