

WHY IS WORSHIP CENTRAL?



Welcome.

Thanks for downloading the Speakers' Notes for the Worship Central Course.

For this first session, we've outlined the structure and key points for the talk, and left space for you to add your own examples. Feel free to personalise the examples and make it your own, but we'd please ask that you keep the core material the same, as we want people to be able to get the same course wherever they are.

We pray this course will be a great blessing to you and your worship team, and we stand with you as you seek to encounter God, equip the worshipper and empower your local church.

Tim Hughes & Al Gordon

Introduction

Welcome to the Worship Central Course. Over the next seven sessions we're going to explore the big theological and practical questions around leading worship in the twenty-first century. What is worship and why should it be central? What is involved in leading worship? How can we build effective teams that make an impact? How can we release God-inspired creativity in our churches and beyond?

Our prayer is that as we give time and space to engage with these questions, God will break out of any boxes we've put him in and give us a huge vision for what he can do in our lives and in our churches. More than anything we hope over these sessions we'll encounter God and be equipped as worshippers so that we can see the local church empowered. We hope it will be life-changing.

Worship is central. All around us, in every possible form and style you could imagine, on Earth just as it is in heaven, today, right now, just as it has been for thousands of years, worship is going on.

Throughout the world and throughout history, there has always been a conversation going on about worship. From the church fathers wrestling with what worship should look like in the explosive decades after Jesus, to the reformers asking what God requires of us in the light of

Scripture, the question remains: how should we worship? Today people are still equally passionate about styles and expressions of worship.

Insert story

If you have your own example, tell a story of a time you encountered someone with strong opinions on worship. You may use Tim's story below as a guide to help you prepare. If you do not have your own example, tell the story below about Tim.

Example story

Tim: A few years ago I was packing away my guitar after leading worship at church, when a lady approached me asking if I had the name of the third or fourth song we had sung that morning. I started to go through the list. Together we established that it wasn't 'Open the Eyes of my Heart', or 'Shout to the Lord'. It was then that it dawned on me that perhaps she meant 'Here I am to Worship', a song that I myself had written. I rather arrogantly assumed that she wanted to thank me for writing the song and was about to share a story about how the song had 'blessed her.' Excited to hear what she had to say, I gently prompted her, 'Oh it wasn't by any chance "Here I am to worship"? I even began to sing the chorus, trying to recreate the moment for her!'

Quick as a flash she cried out, 'Oh no, I hate that song. Whenever I hear that song I want to vomit!' I began to go bright red, pretending it was a song by Hillsong that I didn't like either! Here was a lady with strong opinions about worship!

Many of us feel passionate about worship and are excited to grow in our understanding of what it means to build a firm foundation for a lifetime of authentic, heartfelt worship. Perhaps some of us may feel disillusioned with worship, tired of performance, burnt out by empty religion, left feeling somewhat cynical by things seen and experienced.

Or maybe others are afraid of the change that seems to be sweeping through many churches around us and we are left feeling unsure of what we can bring.

Wherever you are at, you have an important role to play in the worshipping life of the local church.

Worship involves all of our lives, not just one part. Through the rest of this course we are going to be focusing mainly on one specific aspect of worship – expressing our worship through creativity and music. This is a crucial part of worship, but it's also important to remember that it is only one aspect of what worship involves.

Let's briefly look at the bigger picture of what worship is and why it is so central in our lives.

Firstly:

1. Worship is our purpose

God has a purpose for our lives. We are not an accident of science or a cosmic mistake. We have been created for a purpose and that purpose is to worship. The Westminster Shorter Catechism proclaims that the 'chief end' of humankind is to 'glorify God and to enjoy him forever.' Our purpose in life is found in bringing glory to God and knowing the joy of relationship with him.

The God who created us as an act of pure joy intends for us to know his love and to love him in response. In Ephesians, we see that before the creation of the world, God chose us to be in relationship with him and that our very existence is for 'the praise of his glory'.

Ephesians 1:4–6 says, 'For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his children

through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace ...’

So, worship is central because God made us – not as a project to be discarded once creation was complete, but as children with whom he would share a powerful, ongoing relationship. And this relationship impacts everything.

Worship is the total alignment of our heart, soul, mind and strength with the will of God. It is our wholehearted response to God’s extravagant love and mercy. William Temple, the great Archbishop, wrote that, ‘Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness, nourishment of mind by his truth, purifying of imagination by his beauty, opening of the heart to his love, and submission of will to his purpose. And all this gathered up in adoration is the greatest of human expressions of which we are capable.’

You only have to take a quick look through the Bible to see just how profound the call to worship is:

When Abraham first encounters God, he is called to obedient sacrifice – an act of *worship*. When Moses leads the people out of Egypt, it is so that they can *worship* the Lord, and Miriam leads them in a song of *worship*. When Hannah hands over her much longed-for baby son, Samuel, to the Lord, she lifts up her voice to *worship*. When David dances before the Lord with all his might, it’s an act of *worship*. When Elijah calls down fire from heaven, it is in the context of *worship*. When Job loses everything, he falls to his knees in *worship*.

In the New Testament, when Mary knows that she is carrying in her womb Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, she *worships*. When the Wise Men greet the Christ child, they

worship. When the infant Christ is presented to Simeon in the temple, he *worships*. When the disciples realise that Jesus Christ is the Lord, the Messiah, they *worship* him.

As Matt Redman writes, ‘When we face up to the glory of God, we find ourselves face down in worship.’

The truth is, everybody worships something. The English word ‘worship’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon ‘weorthscipe’ which literally means to ascribe worth to something. If something captivates our heart’s affection, our mind’s attention and our soul’s ambition, it effectively has our worship.

However, our ultimate purpose is to worship God. You may have all the money in the world, every earthly possession you desire and still be left feeling flat and lost. Until we discover our purpose in God, we will never be satisfied. St Augustine once prayed ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’ In Jesus, we find the answer to the meaning of life. We have been made by the Maker and saved by the Saviour with the one extraordinary purpose of enjoying relationship with God.

Today, we are invited into the beautiful exchange that is worship, and here we find our true identity and purpose as worshippers of the living God.

Secondly:

2. Worship is our priority

If worship is our purpose, and it finds expression through the whole of our lives, then it stands to reason that we must make it the main priority in our lives. We need to learn what it means to make the worship of Jesus Christ central. Put simply, worship is our response to what we value most.

Insert story

Insert your own humorous story that makes the point that your relationships require you to give your all. For instance, Tim tells a story about telling his future wife Rachel that he was 99 per cent sure he wanted to marry her. It didn't go down too well. Tell your own story of how you discovered that the best relationships require you to give it your all.

If you cannot think of a story to tell, you can tell the story about Tim Hughes below.

Example story

Tim: 'When my wife Rachel and I were dating, I remember all too well the conversation we had when we started to talk about marriage. One afternoon together, Rachel shared how much she loved me and said that she knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I was the one for her. I wanted to say something equally romantic back to her in response, but all I could hear coming out of my mouth was, "Rachel, I'm 99 per cent sure I want to marry you as well." Judging by her reaction, I quickly realised 99 per cent isn't good enough!'

A marriage will only work if that relationship is prioritised. Similarly, genuine worship involves giving everything we are to God. He needs to become our number one priority, above every other ambition, affection and activity.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is invited to the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha absorbs herself in the busy preparation of organising a meal, while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, refusing to give in to the formidable cultural and religious expectations of the day. It was a shocking gesture, but she was utterly devoted, utterly determined to make the most of every minute, to hold on to the Lord's every word.

Practicing hospitality and welcoming strangers was a high religious duty, set out in Scripture, and highest of all was to welcome a traveling rabbi or teacher. And yet Mary did something radical and counter-cultural. Luke's Gospel describes her as 'sitting at Jesus feet', in the posture of a disciple, effectively asking to become a disciple herself.

Frustrated and outraged, Martha burst in and even interrupts the teacher, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' And yet Jesus defends Mary's choice: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.'

Worship will only be our priority if we choose to make it so.

God does not force us to worship him. We are left with a decision to make: will we choose to be like Martha, caught up in the busyness of life, even distracted by doing things for Jesus; or will we choose to be like Mary, whose priority was to sit at Jesus' feet, completely focused on him, not letting anything, not our ambition or self-interest, not the expectations of others, nor any kind of distraction, get in the way. That choice has implications for our time, our lifestyle, our money, our energy and our ambitions in this life. In worshipping God we make him the priority. As Richard Foster writes, 'If the Lord is to be Lord, worship must have priority in our lives. The divine priority is worship first, service second.'

Bishop Sandy Millar, the former leader of Holy Trinity Brompton in London, tells the story of attending an early Vineyard Conference in California. Having been dramatically inspired by all that was going on, he went for a walk along the beach to pour his heart out to God. He was so thankful for all that was going on in the life of HTB. As he prayed, he was suggesting things that he could offer up for God to use. But when he asked the question,

‘God what do you want from me?’ he felt God clearly say, ‘Sandy, all I want is you.’ Before we get caught up making grand statements and trying to offer God our ambitions, achievements and money, we need to first and foremost offer up ourselves – all that we are, all that we have been and all that we will ever be. Worship first, service second.

Our very first calling is to love God. In that sense, the ‘Great Commandment,’ to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, must come before the ‘Great Commission,’ to go and make disciples. John Stott wrote: ‘The highest of missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission, nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing, but rather zeal – burning and passionate zeal – for the glory of Jesus Christ.’ If we want to see the re-evangelisation of the nations and the transformation of society, we must learn to make worship our priority.

Thirdly:

3. Worship is about God’s presence

Worship is not about rules, religion or regulations; it’s about relationship. Everything we do must flow from our relationship with God. We miss the point when we reduce worship to programs and practicalities, rather than focusing on the person and presence of Jesus. In John’s Gospel, we see how Jesus redefines the geography of our worship. In chapter 4, we observe a remarkable conversation Jesus has with a Samaritan woman about worship. As the subject of conversation moves from water to worship, Jesus begins to explain this radical revolution. No longer is worship to be limited to temples, techniques and traditions. As Jesus explains, ‘a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.’ Rather, ‘worshippers must worship in Spirit and in truth.’

The centre point of worship was no longer to be found in a temple building made of stone in Jerusalem. It would be – and still is – found in the person of Christ. In Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can now experience the presence of the Father. In worship we can boldly draw near to God, knowing that in response he will draw near to us.

The theologian James Torrance speaks about two different responses in worship: task and gift. Many of us view worship as something *we do*; a task. We attend church, we pray, we read the Bible, we serve the poor, we give, give, give. This view of worship not only places ourselves at the centre of worship, but also leads to exhaustion. By our own efforts we can never do enough.

The other perspective of worship is as a gift. It is our great joy in life. As C. S. Lewis reflects, ‘In commanding us to glorify him, God is inviting us to enjoy him.’ Worship is something we are invited into. In worship, we experience God’s presence and are gathered up into the community of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

We read in Romans 5:5 that in worship we receive God’s love as it is ‘poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’. When we understand worship as time in God’s presence, we discover that, in worship, we are encouraged, envisioned, inspired, restored, replenished and renewed. Worship becomes life changing and exhilarating and it brings radical transformation.

William Temple writes, ‘This world can be saved from political chaos and collapse by one thing, and that is worship.’ In a world of economic crisis, where major institutions are being shaken to the core, where over 27 million people are caught up in human slavery, where millions die of starvation and needless disease, only our God is strong to save. When we worship him, we are filled with his presence and are empowered to be agents of

this transformation and change. Our hearts are softened to love more like Christ and our eyes are opened to see the needs and possibilities all around us.

Insert story

Insert your own story of when you first encountered God through the power of worship. You can use Al's story below as an example to help you prepare, or, if you cannot think of your own story either tell the story below about Al or invite one of your team to give their brief testimony

Example story

Al: 'I clearly remember the moment that I truly began to worship God. I was eighteen and going through a midlife crisis. I'd tried to fill my life with all sorts of stuff, but nothing was doing the trick. One day, someone close to me told me that I could experience a relationship with God, through Jesus. I had pretty much decided to try anything in life once, so I gave it a shot and prayed a prayer there and then. 'If you're out there, God, come and get me!'

Later that day I told a friend that I had invited Jesus into my life. She gave me a recording of some live worship from a large youth gathering. I went back to my room and literally pushed the furniture up against the door, in case anyone caught me listening to what I thought would be cheesy Christian music. I put on my headphones, lay on my bed and hit the play button.

As I pressed play, a crowd on the recording starting to cheer. Instantly I realised this was like nothing else I'd ever heard. I'd been to lots of gigs growing up, and was used to hearing screaming crowds, but this was different. The band started playing, and to be honest there was not that much musically impressive about them. They were singing these simple songs to a God I was not even really convinced existed. But something real was happening; it was almost like I could hear a much more

powerful music going on behind these songs, strains of a greater reality. The words of one song captured my attention:

*'I will offer up my life in spirit and truth,
Pouring out the oil of love as my worship to you,
In surrender I must give, my every part,
Lord, receive the sacrifice of this broken heart.'*

I stopped the track and rewound. In that moment, I wanted to give my life to this Jesus who accepted me as I was, broken heart and all. I listened to that song the second time and prayed those words as a prayer.

Nothing prepared me for what happened next. It was like Jesus walked into the room. I found myself overwhelmed by a sense of being in the presence of God. Tears began to roll down my cheeks. I found myself weeping out loud and shaking. Looking back, it is clear to me that I was being filled with the Holy Spirit, but at the time I had no idea what was going on. All I knew was that I was encountering God for the first time, there on my own in my room. In a heartbeat, the world went from monochrome to technicolour. From that moment on, I knew that I had to give everything I was in response to this incredible love.'

God has made it possible for every one of us to enter in and experience the privilege of his presence. In Christ, we are free to enjoy access all areas by the Holy Spirit, a pleasure we can enjoy forever. Once there was a time when the people of Israel were symbolically separated from God by a thick curtain in the temple. In Jesus, we have passed through the security cordon into the Holy of Holies. However, this freedom has come at a great cost. Something extraordinary happened on the day that Jesus offered his life on the cross for us. At the moment Jesus breathed his last breath, the Bible records that the curtain in the temple was torn in two, from the top to the bottom. Jesus has broken down every barrier, opened wide the way and invites us to experience his presence and enjoy

him forever. As we draw near to God, we find ourselves running into the arms of a good and faithful Father, whose love endures forever.

In the presence of this all-loving, creator Father, extraordinary things begin to happen. We begin to change. As we worship in Christ we experience a glorious chain reaction of blessing. We discover more of God's love, his goodness, his faithfulness through every generation, and our hearts cannot help but respond in worship.

We started this session exploring the fact God created us to be caught up in a dynamic relationship with him at every level of our life: heart, soul and mind. When we nurture that dynamic relationship, guess what? We want more. Worship sparks worship. Whatever type we're talking about – the singing or the living, the face-down silence at the foot of the cross or the determination to sacrifice that which we value in pursuit of a deeper connection with God – when we live like this we cannot help but be changed, be made whole and be inspired to want more.

So we end where we began: worship is central to everything we do, to everything we are and to every aspect of how we live in the kingdom of God. Worship is central to everything the church does, regardless of style, denomination or tradition. All that we believe, think, say and do must flow from our beating heart of worship. Jesus is our purpose, our priority and our privilege, and today he calls us back to discover the centrality of worship.

Throughout this course, I'd love to encourage us all to do one simple thing: to make worship even more central to our lives. That's the invitation: to embark on a glorious adventure that never ends, but that continually captivates and satisfies. When our worship is focused on Christ, when we find our purpose in him, prioritise him and spend time in his presence, then we will see not only lives being transformed, but we will see the



transformation of society and culture all around us. And this is why we believe worship is central!

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the amazing gift of Jesus. Thank you that in him we find our true purpose as worshippers. We pray you would help us make worship our priority, and that we would enjoy the great privilege of drawing close to you in worship. Come Holy Spirit as we wait ...

Next

We'd encourage you to have a really good time of waiting on God, allowing him to reorder people's priorities. As you feel comfortable, we'd encourage people to pray for each other and to make space for the Holy Spirit to meet with people.

Once the time of prayer ministry has ended, encourage people into their groups and to serve tea and coffee. The questions for discussion are available at the bottom of the Guest Notes, which can be downloaded from WorshipCentral.org.

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