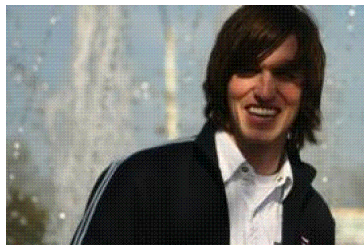


# Lines and Spaces

*Song and Scroll Ministries* *Second Quarter, 2006*

## Interview with Aaron Keyes

This quarter's newsletter features an exciting interview with Aaron Keyes from Lawrenceville, Georgia. I interviewed Aaron as the first of a group of interviews to help church musicians and pastors gain a clearer perspective on what worship and music's role is in the church. He is one of the versatile contemporary worship leaders in the church today, which gives him a unique perspective on what it means to worship God corporately. Aaron's grace and discernment are evident by all who know him, and you will find Aaron's responses both candid and provocative.



Aaron Keyes began leading worship in the summer of 1998 at the JH Ranch, a Christian camp in Northern California. Upon returning to college, Aaron and a few friends began a weekly late-night worship service, called Underground, which convened for two years and attracted hundreds of college students from across the state. Since then, Aaron has served as the worship pastor for CrossRoads Community

Church, worship leader for Wayfarer Ministries' 20-something Bible-study called Engage, and he has traveled around the nation and to various countries to worship with various other communities as well. His passion is for the body of Christ to come together in Biblical praise.

Aaron serves at Grace Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia. In March of 2005, he began serving as the worship pastor of Midtown Community Church as well, also in Atlanta. This is a church plant from Grace that meets on Sunday evenings.

Between church life, traveling, and parenting, Aaron and his wife Megan are loving their lives and excited about what God's going to do next. They have two children, Judah and Cooper, and they are eagerly awaiting the arrival of their third child in July of 2006! Aaron has several CDs and tons of cool resources on his website, <http://www.aaronkeyes.com>. Aaron would love to talk further with anyone who has questions about his ministry. He can be reached at [aaronkeyes@mac.com](mailto:aaronkeyes@mac.com).

## Why does God want us to worship corporately, as opposed to just individual worship?

The society we live in places a great deal of importance on individualism. Everything nowadays seems to say, "Have it your way, right away." This individualism has found its way into our worship as well, not to mention our entire view of God's work in salvation. While I was studying in college, a mentor recommended that I fill in my name in John 3:16 to say, "For God so loved Aaron Keyes that he gave his only begotten Son..." I remember it making me feel nice and warm, but at the same time wondering if I hadn't just colossally underestimated the global aspect of salvation. Now I'm beginning to understand that what God's doing through salvation is as much about global redemption as it is my own individual salvation.

Consequently, this has begun to change my worship dramatically. While it's still an almighty privilege to come before God as individuals in worship, it's also an indispensable gift that we can come not just as individuals before God but as one body, made up of many parts. In corporate worship at my church, while I don't discount the thousand or so unique, individual connections between any given person and God happening at any moment, I place greater emphasis on the one massive connection between God and us, His people. It goes directly against our culture (which in this case I think is a good thing), and it also helps to remind us that we are neither disconnected islands, nor independent parts contributing to a whole, but rather, we are the people of God, a living and growing organism (or body, if you will). Just singing "We exalt you" versus "I exalt you" subconsciously shifts my thinking from my little tunnel to God, into a broader perspective of us as God's people having a connection with God.

Of course, you don't want to neglect individual worship either. It's so important for me on Monday morning to get with God and bless Him for His goodness and worship Him by myself. But I can do that any day, anytime. So when we come together as a Church for corporate worship, I try to place my personal connection off to the periphery and see the beauty of the entire body, with Jesus as our head. Plus, the singing is a lot more beautiful with a myriad of voices than it is when I'm alone on my porch!

## What do you see as the primary role of the worship pastor in a church?

The primary role of a worship pastor is to worship Jesus. We as worship pastors need to set the pace, vision, and direction, as well as develop an ethos of worship, praise, and gratitude for our congregations. We need shepherd our teams by loving everyone who serves with us. We need to teach our teams and our congregation what the Bible says about praise and worship. We need to reproduce worshipers (and worshipers with gifts in leadership especially)! But before any of that, we must, without distraction, be committed to being worshipers ourselves. We must prioritize stretching ourselves in worship, always growing and learning new things. We need to spend more time preparing our hearts than we spend preparing our instruments. We need to spend more time in worship off stage than we do on stage. And the moment we get these priorities flipped around is the moment we begin to veer into lesser glory. The Lord wants to move us from glory to greater glory, but we must be committed to reflecting his glory. We can't contrive the glory of God; we can only reflect it. And until we bask, we've nothing to reflect.

## What is the difference between leading in music and leading in worship?

When I think about leading in worship, I think about priestly work. A priest goes before God on behalf of people and goes to the people on behalf of God. A worship leader is a relay between God and man. Maybe a good word to describe that is prayer—communication with God. Leading worship is more prayer than performance. Leading music can be more about performance than prayer. A worship leader leads people in the direction of prayer with things that deal with His greatness, our sin, how we want to love Him. And all of that is completely removed from music. It's interesting that "worship" is first mentioned in the Bible with Abraham and Isaac in Gen. 22. Music connected to worship doesn't show up until about 500 years later in Ex. 15 and the song of Miriam. And so our most important areas of leadership are in the areas of freedom, expression, and affection toward our God, which are all non-musical things. A worship leader must be vulnerable toward the Lord.

Leading music, on the other hand, doesn't really require as much vulnerability. A few days ago I watched a Justin Timberlake concert on TV. Everyone sang along, they raised their hands when he told them

to...actually it looked like a lot of churches on Sunday morning. If you lead people musically, you just take them into music, into a song. At best maybe you're leading people through some emotions or a story. But none of that inherently has to do with worship.

At the same time I don't want to downplay the power of music. So many times in the Bible, when the Holy Spirit is released, music is playing. Job 38 says that God created the universe to the music of the angels. When Elijah has the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Carmel, he cues the musicians to play before the fire comes down from heaven. Whenever David played his lyre in the king's court, the evil spirit tormenting Saul would leave. There is an important link between the spiritual and the musical, and we need to be able to do both.

What about leading worship then? To lead means to go somewhere. If I lead a group into the wilderness in Colorado, it presupposes that I know the wilderness, that I've been there before, and that we're going to go farther than they'd been before. We're going further into God. And as leaders, we're called to be out in front and make it clear where we're going. I hear a lot of worship leaders say they want to be invisible, but that isn't how it's supposed to be. He raises us up not so we'll be seen, but so we can hear the Holy Spirit, do what He's saying, and lead others into that. Our calling is to be before them then lead them. We lead people through music. But worship is always the goal.

## How can a worship pastor deepen the spirituality, and perhaps be an agent of change in the believer's life?

The worship pastor is the one who's invoking the presence of God. He's invoking more than just the omnipresence—of course, God's already there—but he's inviting the Holy Spirit to come in more of a Shekinah-glory sense, to appear in a unique and powerful way. When that happens and a group of believers is there, collision and exchange happen and ashes turn into beauty.

The worship leader can raise expectancy in the community that God will come and work, and that He'll work in more than just a spiritual sense. He doesn't want to intersect merely with our spiritual piety, but with our bodies, our intellects, and our emotions too. Why wouldn't we expect that a tumor could be healed or depression cured or a barren woman made fruitful?

The danger is when we start expecting God to do what we want. If we start saying that God has to do "this," or we rule out the possibility that God might have something else for us, we actually are treating Him like a magic genie. If my kids come to me every time expecting a little present or a new toy, they'll be disappointed. But they burst into my room every morning expecting me to be there, to love them, then it's so sweet. We come with the expectancy that we'll get to be with God in a unique setting—the beauty of His people. It's important to worship with a healthy spirit of expectancy instead a list of expectations that we need God to fulfill in our certain way. Expectancy is so important. Remember, Jesus—Jesus—could not do any miracles where there was unbelief.

I also think that a worship pastor has a very powerful ability to speak blessing into the lives of the congregation. Again, it's a priestly duty. And our power to bless is directly linked to our ministry to the Lord. Hopefully, the worship pastor spends most of his time with the Lord.

Another way that the worship pastor deepens the spirituality of his people by helping them see the goodness of God in all of life. As leaders, we should be grateful people. And that gratitude should spill over into the congregation.

Finally, if a worship pastor spends Monday through Saturday seeking the Lord and relays that message, it will very much deepen the spirituality of His people. Faith comes by hearing, and it's very possible that a leader could build up his congregation's faith just by communicating the specific words of God for that group.

## What goes through your mind as you're preparing a set of songs for a service in terms of theme, order, etc.?

My philosophy is that "the service is the message." I want every song to contribute to what God's doing in our midst. From the first note strummed to the closing word of the benediction, I hope to lead our congregation down a logical, conscious thought process. This can involve music, videos, communion or

baptism, a sermon, an offering, prayer, etc. My hope is that the entire 'liturgy' would be congruent and fluid, having focus and solidarity.

The first thing I do is talk to my pastor about how he hopes to see God move in our time together and what sort of message he's going to be teaching. If he's teaching on Lamentations, I don't want to plan a worship set that talks about how good God is and how great our lives are. Better to worship God through lament. Conversely, if he's teaching on gratitude, I don't to plan a worship set about confession or mercy. So, the first thing I try to do is get in stride with my pastor, and ultimately, the Holy Spirit.

From there I pray and brainstorm for several hours about any songs that might fit well with what the morning is going to be crafted around. I ask the Lord to guide me to the songs He'd like to hear, as well as to get me on board with how He'll be speaking and moving in our midst. So a couple of weeks ago my pastor taught on the Great Commission, so I searched through all the songs I've charted out and all my iTunes library for songs about the nations, salvation, or the glory of God going into all the world to get a list of 10-20 songs that could fit.

The next thing I do is consult the Church Calendar. I like to look through the Lectionary, to identify with what Christians worldwide will be using to construct their worship services as well. Oftentimes I'll find rich direction here. We're currently in the season of Pentecost, so I'll also think of songs that would fit well with that, and try to connect them back to the sermon. It was easy connecting the Great Commission with Pentecost. In the worship set then, I'll try to connect what God's doing that given day in our local congregation to what God's doing in congregations worldwide, to remind our congregation that while we're just a few thousand gathered around Atlanta, there are thousands upon thousands gathered all over the world for the same reason that we are. It puts a much bigger perspective on our entire morning too, which I love.

I then begin to just worship, using these songs as a starting point. I see if any of them fit well together thematically, lyrically, or musically. I end up scrapping most of them, but I try to narrow it down to the five or six songs that fit well together, fit well with the sermon, and work well for the type of band we're using that week.

As I arrange songs in a loose order, I try to include verses or passages of Scripture that might segue one song to the next. I place a great emphasis on things making sense in the order of worship. It should not be sporadic and arbitrary, but well thought through and cogent. When I talk with my wife, we don't bounce from one topic to another, with no resolution of anything in between. We naturally go from this thought to the next, then on to the next. I try to structure worship services this way too, not jumpy with all sorts of elements disconnected from one another. In other words, I try to eliminate distractions. If my wife and I are out on a nice date, I don't want to have distractions between us all night, be they over-zealous young waiters or blaring loud music or having a table located by the front door... I want to be able to just enjoy her, and enjoy our time together. In worship, we're trying to create environments where people can enjoy God, sans distractions. There's enough distraction in life already; when we come to worship, it's nice to be able to just gaze on God.

Musically, there are a few very simple things we can do to help in this. Just arranging our songs in keys that flow together is a huge, but very simple, step. If you're singing "Here I am to Worship" in E and you want "I Love You Lord" to follow in F, just transpose it down to E. This gets rid of those few moments between songs where your guitarist is moving a capo, your band is getting ready to start the next song, and you've got to change keys as well. Then don't even stop between the two songs. Just make it one seamless thought: "You're altogether wonderful to me, I love You Lord..." This is very simple, and by just removing a 4 second gap between those two songs you might really help some of us retain our focus (especially those of us who are more prone to ending up on Adiról at some point in our lives!) and remain "lost in wonder, love and praise."

Ultimately, we do all we can, asking God to guide us, and then we give it God and ask him to take it wherever He pleases. So I hold on to my set-lists pretty loosely. Rarely does a week go by when we actually play everything exactly like I'd planned. Generally, we see how God's moving, and we try to get in line to move with Him. If that requires tossing a song and inserting another, we'll do it. Last week, I felt sure we needed to lead a song we'd never rehearsed, so I printed out the chart in the middle of the sermon, handed it

out to the band, and told them to follow me! It was the exact thing that needed to happen. And the band did just fine!

Will you address the difference between creating a dynamic environment for worship by manipulating the lighting, music flow, and energy, etc. as opposed to the authentic working of the Spirit?

Lighting and sound are not “spiritual.” They aren’t good or bad. But they do push and pull on our emotions. It’s not that those things work against the authentic mood of the Spirit. It’s just different. Jesus said that the wind blows wherever it pleases. No number of lights will make the wind blow. In the same way, a simple guitar and a handful of people without a set list can’t make the wind blow. The key is a group of people who gather expecting God, who gather to worship. If that’s there, the Spirit will work.

You have written and discussed the physical postures of worship in some detail. What correlation do you think there is between the spiritual, physical, and emotional components of worshiping God? What baggage do people have that prevents them from expressing worship more freely, and what encouragement would you offer to help people realize that worship can be more transforming when there is greater freedom to express God’s greatness and our response to redemption?

God didn’t create us to be compartmentalized. If I’m sick physically, I’m not emotionally ecstatic. Spiritually, it’s kind of the same way. I had typhoid for a couple of weeks, and during that time, I didn’t have a whole lot of spiritual passion. It’s all connected. When one part of our life is afflicted, the others are affected. In the same way, if you get some terrible news and your emotions are ransacked, you’ll find yourself in a different posture—some people say, “I just need to sit down.” Similarly, if you’re excited, you automatically show it physically. Everyone stands up to cheer at a Braves game when Jeff Francoeur hits a game-winning grand slam.

I think the Psalms reflect this interconnectedness. There, you find so much talk about the body—spreading out hands, aching in bones, and dancing with God. We’re kind of silly to try to divide ourselves into pieces. In church, we’ve separated them, which implies that God only wants to deal with the spiritual part. But Paul said we need to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. James 4 says we need to wash our hands AND cleanse our hearts. And in the Hebrew language, there is no word for “spiritual.”

So where did the division come from? I think it’s mostly cultural. I grew up in Greenville. When mom made spaghetti, I would be scolded for slurping noodles. It’s just not good manners in a Southern home. Then I spent a summer in Japan. There, you’re being impolite if you don’t slurp your noodles. I guess the louder you slurp, the more you’re enjoying your meal. When it comes to worship, a lot of us have spiritualized an issue that is just cultural. If you don’t raise your hands, it doesn’t mean you don’t love Jesus. The same guy could be, emotionally, just as excited about worship as he was about the football game he went to the night before. But culturally, he doesn’t feel free to worship in the same way.

Maybe we need to start by identifying the cultural issues that affect the way we worship. And then we need to recognize that any kind of division between our bodies, emotions, and spirits is simply not biblical. God designed us to worship Him with our whole person. This opens up an exciting chance to figure out how God has wired us. Some people are kind of shy, and they may not burst out in dance or shouting. That’s not me. I’m pretty loud. When I shank a volleyball spike, a lot of loud noises come out. For some reason, we kind of shut that part down when it comes to God—we turn off certain parts of our wiring.

What would it look like if you acted just as you were naturally wired when you were in church? I don’t think everyone would do cartwheels in the sanctuary before God. But some people really need to. If I’m wired to be a loud and jump yet I’m reticent in worship, I imagine God feels like He’s not getting “the you” He’s made. So we train people in various postures. And then we encourage them to work out the way their wiring freely expresses itself in worship before God.

None of this makes much sense, though, if the worship leader doesn’t exemplify it. And it’s important to be sensitive. This process can take a bit of time. Try to stay just one step ahead (not miles ahead).

Again, if you're leading someone into the wilderness and you walk miles ahead of them, you're just taking a walk. So be sensitive to the environments in which you lead.

Do you have advice you would give a music or worship leader who is discouraged about the lack of vitality in his congregation's worship?

It has to start with prayer and fasting. I mean, really humble yourself on behalf of your community. Be a priest. Go to God on their behalf. Prayer and fasting isn't magical and doesn't earn points, but it does tell God that you need him to work in the church more than you need the next meal.

We also need to be different from but in touch with our community. We need to know what God's doing in our midst. A worship pastor, as opposed to a one-time visitor, lives in his community. I have a sense of the stuff that's happening in all the different ministries. And that's where the growth process begins. If you love people well, pray on their behalf, it's much easier to lead. When we worship, we start by praising God for what He's doing here. So pray, fast, and live. Get in touch with what God's doing. He'll give you a vision for what He wants to do.

What role do you see between worship and missions broadly, and corporate worship as a means of evangelism specifically?

The relationship between worship and missions is that you can only worship as deeply as you are committed to living out the gospel. Heb. 13:15 says, "Through Jesus, let us continually offer to God the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips giving thanks to his name." It's a very worshipful, spiritual idea. Then, in the next verse—the same sentence—it says, "Do not forget to do good and share others, for with these sacrifices, God is pleased."

Until worship finds its way out into the world, it's incomplete. Worship and evangelism are incredibly symbiotic. It's giving and taking. It's life-giving. A community that worships deeply will see life spring up all around it. In Is. 1, God says that he won't listen to the worship of his people because Israel is not living worship. When the Pharisees ask Jesus the most important commandment, He gives them two. He tells them that you'll know how well you're loving God by how well you're loving people. The Pharisees would have known both of those two commands. But it's incredibly profound that Jesus connects them.

When you're with God in worship, you begin to pick up God's character traits. And His heart is for the nations. If your heart and life isn't for the nations, then maybe you aren't as close as you think you are. I find that when I worship, I begin to love people who are foreign, broken, or different. And I realized that this is probably the most natural kind of love. God created us to love well, and worship restores that authentic love. God is looking for authentic people. And we become more authentic—more accurate to the image of God—when we worship.