

From Passive to Participative Worship

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How engaged are the worshipers in your congregation? Do they tend to function as observers or active participants? This session explored how to design worship services that invite dynamic participation.

Introduction

One growing concern among pastors and worship leaders today is the undeniable lack of participation by the people in corporate worship. Passivity is a problem. And it really doesn't have to do with any particular style of worship. We simply fail to design and lead services that invite and even require the engagement of our people.

Not long ago, a pastor from a large church in Columbus, Ohio called me and wanted some advice. He said that in his contemporary service, he was noticing that the only real thing the congregation was asked to participate in was the singing. Yet when he watched carefully week after week, he noticed that there was little energized singing from the people. Rather, they were depending upon the praise team and band to perform the songs while they followed along to any degree that they desired. The result? A weak engagement with worship. He was concerned.

A traditional service I visited recently told the same story but with a different slant. Most of the activity of the service was presentational. A choir sang, the congregation applauded. Three young girls played simple, classical recital pieces on the piano; the people applauded. A vocalist sang a solo; the congregation applauded. The preacher preached a rousing sermon (however no one applauded!). The congregation functioned as an audience for whom the performers performed.

I don't think it was the intention of either of these two services to promote passive worship. But someone did fail to design and lead the service in such a way that participation was encouraged and passivity was discouraged. Thankfully, more and more people are becoming aware of the necessity of participative worship.

Worship trends are beginning to move slowly toward more participation in worship. This is one of the features of Postmodernism-engagement, involvement in whatever enterprise is being undertaken. In too many churches, the platform ministry has dominated the worship service. In such a staged environment, the congregation represents little more than an audience.

Where do we begin? *How* do we begin to discover the movement from passivity to participation?

Let's begin with a brief word study. First, I would like us to unwrap some key English word definitions, and then we'll look at a few biblical words. I think that you will see how a surface look at some of these key words will inform our process. Following this, I will share some very practical means of moving towards greater participation in worship.

Part One: Word Studies

First of all, what is **participation**? It means:

- to take part in
- to share in
- to partner in.

What is a **partner**?

- *A person who shares or takes part with another*
- a *companion* in dancing (a dance partner)
- or a *player on the same side* in a game (a contest partner).

It is easy to see that to participate is to agree to be a partner in an effort. There is an investment to be made that the other party is counting on.

One more English word definition can prove helpful here, and that is the word that is the opposite of participation: **passive**. To be passive is:

- to be acted upon, not acting;
- showing no interest or initiative.

(The Pocket Oxford Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 1992)

Now what is fascinating is that the biblical words used for worship are always active, not passive. There are several words translated in English as "worship" in the Old Testament, but the one used by far the most is the Hebrew word, *shachah*. It is an action word. It means:

- to prostrate oneself (as a subject to their master);
- to bow down or stoop.

For example, in Ps. 66.4, "All the earth *worships* you (bows down to you) . they sing praises to your name."

Nehemiah tells us that when Ezra opened the word of God to read the law to the Jews who had returned from exile, all the people stood up, proclaimed "Amen! Amen!", lifted their hands in praise, bowed their heads and *worshipped* the Lord (prostrated themselves) with their faces to the ground (Neh. 8.5-6). How's that for participation? Here the people clearly acted rather than were acted upon.

The word for worship most used in the New Testament is *proskuneo*, the Greek counterpart to *shachah*. It also means:

- to prostrate oneself,
- to do reverence,
- to kiss towards.

It is used in Matthew 2, when the wise men entered Jesus' house and "saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down (worshiped) and paid him homage" (Mt. 2.11).

In John's vision recorded in Revelation 7.16, "all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God (prostrated themselves), singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!"

I get really excited when I realize that "worship is organized and directed *action* to God, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit" (my original definition). And it is done in partnership with one another. A Christian worship service is an opportunity to get busy and participate in this holy endeavor.

In fact, you could say that worship is work! Indeed it is! Good worship invites us to invest ourselves and offer ourselves and perform a service to God in the sanctuary.

Recently some Episcopalian seminarians were overheard to say on their way to chapel, "Let's go get God worshiped!" They didn't say it begrudgingly or with a sense of obligation. They simply had a sense that God is the Audience of One awaiting the active service of his children. Sometimes we attend worship to watch others worship God (i.e., those on the platform); instead we need to realize that God attends worship to watch US actively serve him. *We minister to God.*

You may also be interested in knowing that both the Old and New Testaments contain words translated as worship that carry with them the emphasis of work. The Hebrew word, *abad*, is translated in English as worship. It refers to the work of the priests and Levites as they attended to all of the details of covenant worship. It included the sweaty, messy duties of the temple sacrifices, the lighting of the lamps, the making of fresh shewbread; in short, *abad* included all of the ministerial duties of the priests as they attended to God's commands for worship.

Leitourgia, a Greek word translated as worship in the New Testament, referred to much the same thing: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (service, work, ministry)" (Romans 12.1). "*Leitourgia* is used in reference to formal priestly service, ministry, or 'liturgy', carried out by people like Moses, Zacharias, and Christ." (See Liesch, p. 171)

- The writer of Hebrews (9:21) mentions Moses who ".in the same way.sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship (*leitourgia*)". (NRSV)
- "When (Zechariah's) time of service (*leitourgia*) was ended, he went to his home" (Luke 1.23). (NRSV)
- ".we do have such a high priest (Christ), one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister (*leitourgia*) in the sanctuary." (Hebrews 8.1-2) (NRSV)

I think we're beginning to see that to worship is to participate! It is to be active! It is to work, to serve, to minister, to sweat if necessary as we attend to exalting our Lord. It is to be engaged in with our whole being. The biblical vocabulary points to this.

Here's one more key word: *koinonia*. The leaders of the first century church used the word "participate" with great significance. *Koinonia* is the word that means participate. It is also translated as "fellowship" and as "partnership".

In Philippians 1.4-5, Paul writes, "I always pray with joy because of your partnership (participation) in the Gospel". Paul also uses *koinonia* to mean participation in speaking of the Lord's Table when he writes, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ?"

In addition to biblical words used in the text of scripture, I've also discovered another way that the biblical record points to worship as participation. And that is through the biblical narrative. In other words, the story of worship tells a story of participation. I believe corporate worship results in a level of *ongoing* participative worship.

A few years ago the end of Acts chapter two caught my attention. This chapter gives us the first Christian worship service on record. The believers were gathered in Jerusalem awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place (Acts 2.1). And suddenly phenomenal manifestations of the Spirit began to appear and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. Pagans who were in Jerusalem heard the Good News in their own native tongue.

Peter preached a sermon, the text of which we have in vss. 14-36. What is fascinating to me is that there are so many levels of response that are noted as a result of this first worship service. First, there was an emotional response: when they heard Peter's sermon, ".they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'" The crowd appeared so convicted that they were *asking* for ways to participate in ongoing worship!

They had a spiritual response. Peter said, "Repent!" And they did! Their lives were spiritually, dramatically, essentially changed. They were born again. Here is yet a deeper level of participation as a result of worship.

There was a symbolic response. Peter said, after repentance, be baptized. And they were. About 3,000 persons participated in the service of baptism-the powerful symbol of dying and rising with Christ.

And there was a practical and ongoing response to worship. "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2.44). Converts were willing to offer "all things" in order to fully participate in their new life in Christ.

Friends, from beginning to end, worship is participation! In fact, I believe that without participation there is no worship. Participation is the expectation of the Gospel. Participation is necessary for the community to be engaged with the truth. As Chuck Smith comments, "The more people participate, the more likely a part of them will open up to God." ("Leading People to an Encounter with God," *Worship Leader*, August-September 1992, 50)

Believing all of this, the question remains, how do we move from passivity to participation?

Part Two: Moving from Passivity to Participation

Daniel Benedict and Craig Miller, authors of the book *Contemporary Worship in the 21st Century*, say this: "In the Post-Modern, Information-Age culture of the twenty-first century, people will go to those churches that offer them an experience of God that lifts them beyond their everyday existence. In an (entertainment) world, filled with images and sound bites, everyday experience will be hard to match, except in one way: the live, hands-on experience of worshipping the living God in a community of faith." (Benedict & Miller, Introduction)

In order to help you move your congregation from passivity to participation, let me offer you six principles. I will follow each principle with several ideas for application.

Principle #1: Recognize that participation is the very thing that this generation desires. For worship of the 21st century, participation=experience and experience=worship. Participative worship is experiential worship.

Application #1: Design and lead services to involve the whole being:

- Which of the five senses have I employed?

+sight: banners, drama, colors, symbols, etc.

+sound: instruments, symbolic sound (wind, shofar), silence, children's voices, male and female voices, etc.

+smell: fragrances, incense, flowers, etc.

+taste: bread, juice

+touch: human, fabric, wooden cross, the Bible, etc.

Principle #2: Recognize that participation involves partnering with others. A biblical understanding of *koinonia* includes fellowship and partnership in worship. It is the basis for true Christian community.

Application #2:

- Where have I asked the people to connect with fellow worshipers?

+praying in small groups

+Passing of the Peace

+laying on of hands

+sharing of "God moments"

+pronouncing blessing,

+praying at the altar, etc.

Principle #3: Recognize that people will naturally tend to be passive.

They will prefer to be acted upon and will therefore need opportunities and encouragement to participate.

Application #3:

- In how many items of the service did you call the congregation to take action, as opposed to observe (cognitive, think)?
- How many minutes are given entirely to listening vs. action?
- What age groups/social groups are neglected? (children, seniors, youth, minorities, handicapped?)

Principle #4: Recognize that congregations have been largely oriented toward an audience mentality. Much of this stems from the American Revivalist period that yielded evangelistic crusades which, in turn, were imitated in style, form, and content by churches everywhere. This has been set in stone by the television and media generations.

Application #4:

- What physical action have I invited?

+gestures (raising hands, uplifted head, bowed head, etc.)

+movements (clapping, swaying, processions/recessions, etc.)

+postures (bowing, kneeling, standing, prostration, arms open, upturned palms, etc.)

Principle #5: Recognize that worship is work. It is comprised of sacred duties that I perform as I minister to God. I should therefore assume that worship will cost me something. David said, ". I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24.24).

Application #5:

- How much of what is currently being done by leaders can be done by the people? (greetings, prayers, scripture readings, testimonies, altar counselors, etc.)

Principle #6: Recognize that encountering God in worship results in powerful responses. Any time we have sincerely encountered the Holy One, we will be changed.

Application #6:

- Am I intentionally and pastorally guiding worshipers toward appropriate response(s)?
- Have I prayed about the type of response to worship that God desires for a given service?
- Is there an implied response from the scriptural text for the day?
- Is there a symbol that lends itself to reinforcing the word?
- Are there practical ways that I can invite the people to express inward change?
- Am I prepared for any natural emotional response that may occur?
- Am I challenging my people with all of the demands of the Gospel?

What we are really talking about is moving from what I call "program worship" to "participatory worship." We are all familiar with a program. "A program is a sequence of events with performers that is designed to instruct or entertain for a public gathering" (this my very own, original definition!).

For decades (and even centuries), worship in many traditions has resembled a religious program.

There is a topic (God) and we sing *about* God or tell *about* God or *discuss* God. We put in order a sequence of events designed to instruct or entertain the public. We arrange for the performers, hoping that they will add an effective dimension to the program. There may or may not be a logical order for the events, but this is secondary as the topic is what is important.

There are at least three major problems with program worship, if not more.

- It is *about* something rather than *to* Someone. God is the topic of worship rather than the source of worship.
- Programs are typically passive. Generally the attendees are not involved except on the observational level.
- Program worship invites judgment. All programs are judged according to the effectiveness of the speaker or the performers. It is completely natural to respond to a program by evaluating what one liked and didn't like, what one learned or didn't learn, what was of excellent or poor standards. The temptation to critique is simply the natural thing to do, for the performance is done for us and begs for our satisfaction.

To move away from program worship toward participatory worship requires us to counter these three major problems with program worship.

- We must plan for God to be the source of worship rather than the topic of worship. This means that God moves from being the topic to being the living presence that is ready to directly receive our worship. This will mean:
 - choosing congregational song that addresses God by name;
 - using language that reminds us of Christ's real presence in the gathered body;
 - fostering awareness that God is the Audience of One.
- We must intentionally plan for our people to be involved in several significant ways in each service.
 - Double check how much time is given to presentational action vs. congregational action;
 - utilize a variety of the senses regularly;
 - expand the use of all of the worship arts;
 - share in worship design and leadership.
- We must intentionally work at shifting the emphasis from whether *I* am pleased to whether *God* is pleased. We do this by:
 - refraining from unnecessary, judgmental comments about worship leaders.
 - learning what God's expectations for true worship are.

- encouraging one another to share how God was present to them in the service, even in spite of "blunders".

Conclusion

When all is said and done, worship is about experiencing the living God. To experience God is to participate in a conversation with God. It is very different than merely "going to church." Going to church suggests passive worship; coming to offer worship suggests engagement with the God who awaits your presence.

Authors Annie Dillard and James Magaw put it very well (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*):

If you ask me why I go to church, I could start with these reasons:

- To feel better;
- To be with people whose company I enjoy;
- To learn about Jesus;
- To show which side I'm on;
- To keep people from asking why I missed;
- To sing my favorite old hymns;
- To be inspired, taught, and challenged by the sermon.

But if you ask me why I *worship*, you raise the discussion to another plane. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke ?. . . It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offence, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.

When I worship I expose myself to the power of God without any personal control over the outcome. Sometimes it brings healing, peace, forgiveness, confrontation, or hope. Always it calls me to move beyond the farthest point I have yet reached, and pushes me into uncharted territories. Going to church is easy most days. Worship is another matter. It is an awesome thing to know oneself fallen into the hands of the living God.