



## The Hospitable Worship Leader

Competency: Create a welcoming atmosphere where worshipers are encouraged to participate.

### Assignments

1. Read Exodus 24 and answer the questions.
2. Read the Article: *The Hospitable Worship Leader* by Constance Cherry and answer the questions that follow the article.
3. Write out a 1-minute transitional statement that you could use to introduce the song "Mighty to Save." Go over it with your worship mentor. Remember to anchor it in Scripture.
4. Observe an online worship experience from Hillsong, Bethel Church, or another online experience of your choice. Take note of how the worship leader encouraged the congregation to participate. Take special note of how many times people were asked to do something other than sing.
5. Sit down with your worship mentor and walk through next week's worship service, noting all of the potential opportunities for participation.
6. Go to a restaurant that is known for their hospitality. Note the things that the host/hostess did that made you feel welcome.
7. Invite some neighbors over for dinner and practice the art of hospitality.

### Exodus 24

1. Highlight every active verb that describes the assembly of Israel participating in worship.
2. What was the general response of the people when commanded to participate?
3. List some principles from this passage that can be applied to a modern worship service.
4. How does the level of participation at Seven Marks compare to the descriptions in this passage?



## THE HOSPITABLE WORSHIP LEADER: ENGAGING WORSHIPERS AS PARTICIPANTS

By Constance Cherry

Think for a moment about what qualities make for a good host or hostess at a social gathering. We have all probably been in someone's home and felt welcomed and included by the one giving the event. In those cases we remark how the hostess had such a gift for making others feel included. By contrast, we have also no doubt attended a gathering where the hostess seemed uninterested in our being there; she chatted with only a few of the more important people, or perhaps she occupied center stage, drawing the attention to herself. If so, we probably left with a different impression, thinking that we would never return to that kind of event; we felt awkward, unwanted, and ignored. The difference between the two events wasn't the accommodations or the food or the entertainment. The difference was the hostess.

When we gather to worship, there is most often a host or hostess (or several) who leads God's people in the worship dialogue. Corporate worship is not a self-guided tour where we enter when we want and do as we wish until we leave. Corporate worship involves doing things together as we carry on the corporate conversation with God. A guide (the worship leader) functions very much as a host would at a dinner party. He would greet the people warmly, invite them in, make them feel welcome, help them to get situated, and show interest in them as people. He would not do this only as the guests arrived, but he would monitor how well the guests were acclimated to the whole event until it concluded.

Perhaps the most important thing the hostess would do is to see that each of the attendees was participating. You see, the success of a social event depends on the level of engagement of the guests. Everyone needs to be involved in order to feel included, accepted, and valued. It takes a conscientious worship architect to fulfill this role. Designing a great service is very important, but the best service on paper is not a great service until it is "worshiped" in real time with real people. Just as in a social event, it takes intentionality and skill to engage all the worshipers in such a way as to include them in the conversation with God from beginning to end. Participation is the key.

So where do we begin? How do we shift from passivity to participation? Let's begin with a brief word study that should help us gain some perspective. I think you will see how these words will inform our thoughts concerning participation. Following this, I will share some practical means of moving from passive to participatory worship.

### Word Studies



When we turn to the biblical words translated as worship, we find a fascinating thing. These words are always active, not passive. There are a number of words translated as “worship” in English from the Old Testament. The one used the most by far is the Hebrew *shachah*. It is an action word. It means:

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

This word is used in Psalm 66:4, “All the earth worships you [bows down to you]; they sing praises . . . to your name” (emphasis added). The imagery of the earth bowing down before the Lord and praising Yahweh’s name is intriguing indeed. This same word is used in the story of Nehemiah and the renewal of the reading of the law. Nehemiah records 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 and proclaimed “Amen! Amen!” They lifted their hands in praise, bowed their heads, and worshiped (*shachah*) the Lord with their faces to the ground (Neh. 8:5–6). Now that’s interactive worship! Here the people clearly acted rather than were acted upon.

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

- To prostrate oneself
- To do reverence
- To kiss toward

*Proskuneo* 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/ prostrated themselves] and paid him homage" (Matt. 2:11). The vision of the magi in prostration before the infant Jesus is a remarkable thought!

In John's vision, recorded in Revelation 7:12, "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!'"

These are merely two instances of biblical vocabulary translated as "worship" in our English Bibles. The words are important to examine; they portray a consistent idea that biblical worship is active! Biblical worship is participative. In fact, I would argue that without participation there is no worship. Participation is God's expectation as portrayed in Scripture. Participation is critical; the more people participate, the more likely they will open up to God.



Yet even if we accept the argument that Christian worship must be participative, the question remains, how do we move from passivity to participation?

## Moving from Passive to Participatory Worship

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? (e.g. colors, sounds, fragrances, bread and juice).

Principle #2: Recognize that participation involves partnering with others. Understanding of *koinonia* includes fellowship and partnership in worship. Christian community.

Application #2: Have some connection time.

- Where have I asked the people to connect with fellow worshipers? (e.g. praying in small groups, greeting time, kneeling at the altar)

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: Encourage all to participate.

- 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?

Principle #4: Recognize that congregations have been largely oriented toward an audience mentality. This has been set in stone by the television and media generations.

Application #4: Redistribute the activity from the platform to the people.

- What physical action have I invited? (e.g. raising hands, clapping, kneeling, 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: Expect a high investment from worshipers.

- How much of what is currently being done by leaders can be done by the people? (e.g. 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: Let worshipers respond to God.

- 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?
- Are there practical ways that I can invite the people to express inward change?

What we are really talking about is moving from what I call "program worship" to "participatory worship." We are all familiar with a program.

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.

1. It is *about something* rather than *to Someone*. God is the topic of worship rather than the source of worship.
2. Programs are typically passive. Generally the attendees are not involved except on the observational level.
3. 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.

1. 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:



- a. choosing congregational songs that address God by name;
  - b. using language that reminds us of Christ's real presence in the gathered body;
  - c. fostering awareness that God is the Audience of One.
2. We must intentionally plan for our people to be involved in several significant ways in each service.
  - a. Double check how much time is given to presentational action vs. congregational action;
  - b. utilize a variety of the senses regularly;
  - c. expand the use of all of the worship arts;
  - d. share in worship design and leadership.
3. We must intentionally work at shifting the emphasis from whether I am pleased to whether God is pleased. We do this by:
  - a. refraining from unnecessary, judgmental comments about what we liked or didn't like.
  - b. learning what God's expectations for true worship are.
  - c. encouraging one another to share how God was present to them in the service, even in spite of "blunders."

### Conclusion

The hospitality of the leader will make all the difference in the world in corporate worship. It involves more than being friendly or personable; it requires that each guest senses his or her importance, even necessity to worship. This comes through participation. It is the ministry of the worship architect to see that (1) worship is designed to invite ongoing participation of all worshipers, and (2) all are encouraged to offer themselves fully in worship.

### Questions from the Article:

1. What are some characteristics of a worship leader who makes worshipers feel welcome and warmly invited into the worship experience?
  
2. What are some of the conditions of our society that contribute to passivity in worship?
  
3. Other than singing, what are some participative worship activities that you, as a worship leader, can encourage people to join in?



4. Of the six operating principles and applications for participative worship, what challenged you the most? Why?
5. Of the three suggestions for moving away from programmed worship to participative worship, which needs the most improvement at Seven Marks and in your personal leadership?