

# LOOK, MA, NO CONGREGATION!

Questions are funny things. Some are asked even when the answer is already known; others remain unasked because of the responsibility of knowing. There is a question regarding worship that should be asked often, for its answer speaks volumes. The question asks "Could the majority of the worship service proceed without the congregation?" If the answer is "No" (the service could not proceed without the congregation) one can begin to evaluate whether or not the congregation is being engaged in a biblical and balanced manner. If the answer is "Yes" (the congregation is a nice addition but unnecessary to the service) one must ask why the congregation is engaged at all.

Scripture commands that Mankind worship the Creator God, and to this end equips the Church with appropriate and orderly tools for corporate worship. Knowledge of the worship tools is profitable but insufficient in and of itself. The challenge for each worship leader is to integrate these tools into the Body of Christ in creative and discerning ways: creative because that which was meaningful will quickly become mundane; discerning because it is altogether possible to lead in a God-given direction only to discover that no one has followed.

The purpose of this writing is not to nudge the Church into a particular style of worship, but rather to discuss the application of a variety of worship tools. To this end we will discuss these tools in four categories including movement, speaking, singing, and being still. The tools marked with an asterisk\* have been listed but not discussed, as the author's experience is either limited or observational.

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**MOVEMENT** (Stand; Bow; Give; Clap; Kneel; Lift hands; \*Dance)

My charismatic colleagues are reading this and thinking "no problem so far," while my more reserved co-laborers are picturing the blue-haired lady in the second row and are saying "No way." The point is, the blue-haired lady is already doing some of the things on the list; our job as worship leaders is to keep those things fresh and alive. The goal is not the completion of the list; the goal is deep, heartfelt worship on the part of the

believer. The responsibility of the worship leader is to facilitate this worship by injecting fresh meaning into everything we ask our people to say and do.

How many different reasons are there to stand? When I was a young boy, I was taught to stand up whenever a woman or an elderly person entered the room. My Catholic friends stand in reverence whenever the Gospel is read. We must give a reason for having people stand ("stand to honor," "stand to identify with," "stand if you believe," etc.), rather than merely throwing the act in a couple times each service so that people can stretch their legs.

To bow is to lower yourself in the presence of another, thereby showing honor or submission. It is the appropriate thing to do in the presence of royalty. Most people automatically bow their heads when they pray, although we rarely bow from the waist any more. What worship leaders can do is find and incorporate opportunities to bow before God, and to remind people of its significance.

Are there additional methods of giving an offering that will provide both variety and meaning? Alternatives could include coming forward to lay the tithe at the front during singing, or the use of a box in the back of the auditorium? Is there a way to give something besides money: a service of some kind, or prayer support?

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Some churches clap too much, while others not all. Clapping is not for everyone, and is easily replaced with other forms of response. Be sure, however, that your people have some form of response lest they get the "Dead Sea" syndrome: life flows in, but nothing flows out. The result is stagnation and death.

Kneeling is not just for the liturgical: it is appropriate for everyone. Whether in the pews (one knee down), at the altar, or during communion (coming forward to self-serve the elements), kneeling is an appropriate response to an awesome God.

Lifting of hands is neither the goal of worship nor the measure of a church's freedom. It is merely one response which is natural for some and awkward for others. As a leader, lift your hands when singing the phrase "I lift my hands." People will learn from example, and some will follow your actions. When encouraging the lifting of hands, it is kind to

give your people a choice whether to participate. Above all, use the occasion to underscore love and unity in the midst of diversity.

**SPEAKING** (Read; Recite; Repeat; Appreciate; Confess; \*Tongues)

Now my liturgical brothers and sisters are primping, while the non-denominational boys decide whether to dig a rut or a grave. With forethought and preparation, however, "speaking" is another tool which can involve the entire Body of Christ in worship.

Reading aloud, whether from a pew Bible, bulletin, or projected image can unify both thought and heart. While singing a hymn, have the congregation speak one of the verses over the accompaniment; it can be done without losing momentum and can underscore a particular thought. Most hymnals also give a good supply of responsive readings, creeds, psalms, and prayers that can be read together.

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Recitation was an important form of religious education when illiteracy was widespread. It allowed those who were uneducated to know and to integrate deep and profound truths. Whether leading people who cannot read or people who will not read, reciting Truth is an effective way to plant the Word of God in hearts while at the same time stimulating those hearts to worship.

Repeating is not only an effective way of teaching, but is also quite moving when employed with scriptural statements of conviction. Have your people repeat, phrase by phrase, Romans 12:1 ("I am not ashamed of the Gospel...") or Galatians 2:20 ("I have been crucified with Christ...") and watch the look of courage and resolve come upon them. Responsorial phrases such as "I worship You, Lord," or "Thank You, Lord," are also effective ways to incorporate the gathered saints.

Will your people speak to you during the service, when asked? If your answer is "I don't know," perhaps you should give them a chance. People already know how to express appreciation, and one can capitalize on this ability either by asking the congregation to be thankful or by encouraging them to acknowledge the actions or attributes of God.

Involve the congregation in corporate appreciation by allowing them to "fill in the blank." For example, the worship leader would say "Let's speak some praises to God using His

names...God, You are called 'counselor.' God, You are called..." and then motion for them to fill in the blank. By saying just that much one can communicate what kind of sharing is expected and how long it is to be (one word). In a large group, don't ask for responses longer than three words, and repeat every response from the front so that the entire body can hear it. (A simple hand behind the ear will quickly communicate the need for someone to speak louder.) If you have clearly said how you want them to share and they are still reticent, smile and say "I have nothing else planned for this portion of the service." Then step back

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from the microphone or podium; that will usually shake them loose.

On the popular television show *AMEN!*, one episode featured a man confessing before the congregation that he had participated in a torrid affair with an unnamed woman in the choir. Needless to say his confession, no matter how heartfelt, was lost in the ensuing tornado of speculation. Because of situations like this, confession is something that the church has relegated either to the bulletin or to the prayer closet. The Word of God, however, says that we are to "confess our sins one to another."

In trying to implement this directive, take a long-term educational approach. Begin with the choir, teaching them that specific confessions ("I steal" or "I drink too much") are not appropriate for a large group and should be spoken in the context of a small group or with a prayer partner. Next, list confessions which are both general in nature and appropriate for a large group setting (impatient, greedy, undisciplined, angry, fearful) in order to give them a resource from which to draw. Within the context of worshipping God for His holiness, give opportunity for these confessions to be spoken.

When tried with this author's congregation, the choir was on the platform. Indeed, they were the only ones who felt free to confess in the corporate gathering; but that will slowly change. Why? Because God's Word is being implemented in a responsible manner. When we employ God's Word, God's Spirit has opportunity to move; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

**SINGING** (Hymns; Choruses; Responsorial; \*Free Singing)

I am a great proponent of singing in the worship service. There are few other corporate activities that involve body, soul, mind and emotion. Music is a vehicle which drives Truth to the heart, while at

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the same time providing an appropriate avenue of response to that Truth. That said, I believe that the increased use of singing has become both an expression of worship and a replacement for it. Do

we sing more because we plan less? Have we fallen in love with the feeling we get from a well-placed key-change? It seems that the working definition of worship has become an "extended singing time," to the neglect of so many other expressions. Even the forms of singing we do utilize have become rather uncreative in their approach.

Some of the best theology in the world has been written into hymns. Therefore, it is the worship leader's job to find ways to keep them relevant to the people. Make the hymn sound more contemporary, use a different tune, or alternate the singing of men and women. For variety, have the congregation speak a verse, or interject a soloist. To give context, encapsulate the origin of the hymn, or quote relating scriptures. Look for the theology and take the time to prepare people to see and understand it.

Scripture choruses have made their way into many churches in the last twenty years. There is **nothing** we can do as worship leaders that is more important than teaching our people to sing God's Word. To sing His Word is to memorize it; to memorize it is to meditate on it; to meditate on it is to integrate it into the fabric of everyday life. God's Word comes with an unconditional guarantee of success: "My Word shall not return void." (Isaiah 55:11)

Responsorial singing is so simple and can plant a thought or a concept in the mind like nothing else can. The scriptural example is Psalm 136, but any statement of Truth can be sung. Make up a short motif and sing the words "My God never fails" to your congregation, having them repeat it back once or twice. Begin reciting examples of the Lord's faithfulness, interspersing them with the musical response you have just taught them. Simply bring them in with a hand

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gesture. People will not be able to get that thought out of their heads for a week!

## BEING STILL (Meditate; Pray; Listen)

In many churches prayer has become a spectator sport. The congregation, if they pray at all, has been limited to written or rote prayers. Although the pastoral prayer is a good indicator as to whether your pastor knows to Whom he is speaking, it is not the most effective use of the gathered saints. Every believer is a priest, and the pastor's prayers are no more effective than those of their congregation.

Leading in prayer does not mean that the leader prays in the people's stead. (Statistics say that the number of people who are actually praying along with the leader at any given time is staggeringly low.) Rather, the leader should play the role of prompter, guiding the believers through petitions that are relevant and specific, and praises that are from their own hearts. The responsibility and work of prayer is laid upon the shoulders of the saints, where it belongs.

In graduate school this author's roommate was a geologist as evidenced by the constant sound of the rock-tumbler in our closet. The memory of that rock-tumbler has become to me a symbol of meditation: the slow and constant turning-over of a thought or idea. When introducing meditation to the congregation, acknowledge the fact that meditation is both used and abused in a variety of ways and remind them that meditation is also a very scriptural activity. Provide a short phrase upon which to meditate and ask the people to "roll the phrase over and over in your minds, emphasizing each word." For example, the phrase "God is faithful; "**God** is faithful; God **is** faithful; God is **faithful**."

One difference between hearing and listening can be found in the response. When walking through the forest with a bird watcher, I

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**hear** birds; he **listens** and mentally catalogues the presence of each species. When Ezra, the priest, read the Word of God to the Israelites from daybreak until noon; the people listened and wept. We must teach and encourage our people to listen to the point of response. Whether listening to God's Word or to a musical selection, the goal of the people is to listen and to respond. The task of leadership is to both provide something worth listening to, and provide appropriate avenues of response.

## CONCLUSION

"The Spirit and the Bride say come." (Revelation 22:17) The invitation into God's presence has been issued, and God's Word has been provided as a road map to instruct us regarding how to get there and what to do upon arrival. What we are to do is to Worship, and the instructions are the many and varied ways for the saints to participate in worship. To utilize only one or two is like limiting a mechanic to the use of pliers.

Worship leaders can lead and prompt, but until corporate participation is a priority, we have only entertained. Worship must be varied and creative if people are to experience fresh and mature worship. Truth must precede response if it is to be assumed that people's emotions are being engaged by the Holy Spirit. To that end, worship leaders must discern whether their people love "worship," or the Living God. Neither should we addict our people to our particular style of worship-leading, nor to the warm feelings that come through repetition or ascending key-changes.

**If** the worship service could not proceed without the congregation, we must be sure that we are utilizing a variety of worship tools in order to keep response fresh, balanced, and mature. The alternative is either mindless liturgy or emotional addiction.

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**If** the congregation is a nice addition but unnecessary to the service, then the worship leader and the pastor must lead toward change, for if a people's appreciation of change grows stale, they will soon only appreciate stale things.

