

TTT374 - Hosting Sunday Worship. Part 1 - Hosting and NT Worship

06 August 2024

Introduction

If you sat in the back row of your Sunday church service, what do you think you would see? A few years ago I left my usual seat on the front row and sat at the back for three months. What a revelation! I saw many good things, but it was a shock to see church members on Facebook, a sister reading a novel, and others chatting to one another during the singing, sermon and announcements. I asked them why. It turns out that some couldn't see or hear what was going on, others self-confessed that they were not in a good place spiritually, and quite a few were bored. Bored?!

The reasons for this behaviour were multifactorial, but one thing was clear--the people up front were not engaging the people at the back.

Why do we do what we do on a Sunday? What's the *point* of welcoming people, public prayer, the Lord's supper, preaching and the other things we do when we are gathered? It's all too easy to do the same old same old because that's the way it's always been done. Today, we begin a multi-part series exploring the reasons why we do what we do at a Sunday gathering. Additionally, we will discuss how those who lead us in worship can be most useful in *what* they do and *how* they do it.

These guidelines apply to anyone publicly involved on Sunday. That means praying, welcoming, announcing, reading, sharing, leading sung worship, and preaching. By extension, it also involves ushering, serving refreshments, and anything visible on a Sunday morning.

This series comes out of a set of articles I wrote for the Watford Church Christ in 2024. What I am sharing is located in the context of my local congregation. Not everything will apply to you, but I pray and hope there will be enough in the principles to be a blessing.

Leading Worship as Hosting

Perhaps you have never considered it this way, but I believe hosting is a meaningful way to think about leading the congregation in singing, praying, and speaking.^[1]

In his book 'Liturgical Theology', Simon Chan says:

"...the first thing to remember is that worshipers are not in church primarily to welcome one another... They are gathered to meet God; in a sense, God is the host, and we are being welcomed into his presence."

I agree with Chan in principle and suggest that although God is the ultimate host, he delegates that hosting to those leading us when we gather for worship. Therefore, I see those leading worship as sub-hosts who help us be aware of the over-host in our midst—God himself. A good host wants everyone at their event to enjoy themselves. Likewise, someone hosting a section of the service wants everyone (from the front row to the back row) to know that they matter.^[2]

Questions for reflection & discussion

If God is our ultimate host and those leading worship are the local hosts, what does this mean when you lead a prayer, for example? What are you hoping to achieve? Likewise, for the people leading us in musical worship or learning from God's Word?

New Testament examples and teaching on collective worship

What do we know about how the early church worshipped when they gathered? NT instruction about collective Sunday worship is sparse, and NT examples of Sunday services are limited. We can be confident they included prayer/singing (collective expressions of worship), fellowship, learning together (preaching/teaching and reading of Scripture), and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2.42-47; Acts 20.7; 1 Corinthians 11.20; 1 Corinthians 14.26; 1 Timothy 4.13).

Suggestion: Read the Scriptures above (and any others you can find that mention collective worship) and write down what you notice about the services of the NT church. What are they doing, and is it possible to figure out why?

Reflection: When you've done that, does anything stand out that causes you to rethink what you do in your local church?

Aims of collective worship

The aim of gathering together is hard to express in this short recording. However, perhaps we can summarise much of what we hope will happen in these quotes from Ron Highfield's book, 'Rethinking church':

"Worship is a God-directed activity that attempts in thought, word, bodily position and movement, or symbolic use of elements of creation to express a fitting response to the being, character, and action of God."

"...we express awe at God's greatness, gratitude for his generosity, praise for his excellence, longing for his presence, and amazement at his love."

In other words, we gather *because* of God to *connect* with God and *honour* God by what we say and do when we worship together. His love draws us together, inspires us to express ourselves in worship of him, and creates an eagerness to learn from him and about him. Then, he (the Spirit) sends us back out into the world to live Jesus' life and tell people about him.

Summary

God is our ultimate host, but when we lead in a worship setting, we are representing our heavenly host-father. How does this affect the way you speak and act? The New Testament is short on worship service details but long on who we worship. What do you sense are the chief aims of collective worship, and how can you advance those aims when you lead worship?

Let me offer you a challenge of the week. What will you do differently the next time you lead in some form on a Sunday that will engage the back row?

Next week

Next time, we will examine guidance for worship leaders, including context, attitude, connection, themes, overloading, and preparation.

Please add your comments on this week's topic. We learn best when we learn in community.

Do you have a question about teaching the Bible? Is it theological, technical, practical? Please send me your questions or suggestions. Here's the email: malcolm@malcolmcox.org.

If you'd like a copy of my free eBook on spiritual disciplines, "How God grows His people", sign up at my website: <http://www.malcolmcox.org>.

Please pass the link on, subscribe, and leave a review.

"Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs." (Psalms 100:2 NIV11)

God bless, Malcolm

1. See my article on hosting worship [here](https://www.malcolmcox.org/leader-as-host-host-as-leader/): <https://www.malcolmcox.org/leader-as-host-host-as-leader/> ↩
2. See a more in-depth article on [academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/):
[https://www.academia.edu/78354964/Reflections_on_Leader_as_host_host_as_leader?](https://www.academia.edu/78354964/Reflections_on_Leader_as_host_host_as_leader?source=swp_share)
[source=swp_share](https://www.academia.edu/78354964/Reflections_on_Leader_as_host_host_as_leader?source=swp_share) ↩