

“The Worship Service: Active or Passive?”

By Evangelist Ken Lynch

Historically, it seems that there have been two ways of approaching what many refer to as “the worship service.” The first would be the more “liturgical” approach and the other the more “participatory” approach. One is passive and the other is quite active by which I mean that the worshipper is actually involved in worship service. In the passive approach, the congregation has little participation other than, perhaps, singing a hymn and/or reading from a pre-printed “order of worship” almost like reading from a script. For the most part, the congregation sits in the pew and watches the “program performed” for him: the great organ prelude, the choir doing most of the singing, and the “preacher” doing his thing. In the Roman Catholic Mass, as well as in other liturgical churches, there may be some participation in one or two congregational songs. But, for the most part, people worship in these types of churches are simply observers and listeners.

In the “active” worship service, the worshipper is, or at least should be, actively involved in every part of the service. Permit me to go through a “typical” order of service and demonstrate what I mean as we look at each item. Obviously, not every service in every church will be exactly the same and not everything listed here is incorporated in every worship service. I have tried to include in this example most of the items that make up the average worship service in a fundamental, Bible-preaching church. My purpose is to show how, item by item, the individual worshiper may actively participate.

- Prelude
- Welcome
- Opening Hymn
- Opening Prayer
- Hymn (sometimes more than one)
- Choir (if the church has one)
- Scripture Reading
- Pastoral Prayer
- Announcements
- Offering
- Hymn
- Special Music (optional)

Sermon
Invitation
Closing Hymn

1. *The Prelude.* The Prelude is not music that is played before the official start of the worship service, it *is* the beginning of the service. While most people use this time to greet one another and fellowship, that is not the purpose of the prelude. The Prelude usually begins about ten minutes before the official welcome and the singing of the opening hymn. The purpose is for the worshipper to use those few minutes, after having greeted folks prior, for personal reflection and meditation as he prepares his heart for the rest of the service. So, in fact, the Prelude *does* offer the individual an opportunity to personally participate.

2. *The Welcome.* Even the “welcome” offers a time to participate as the pastor greets his people and welcomes guests to the service. This time should be used to glance around noting visitors and other guests in order to greet them after the service has ended helping them to “feel at home.”

3. *Opening Hymn.* It should be quite obvious here that this involves participation. Sadly, however, such is often not the case. It seems that there are always some who, while standing when asked to do so, do not open either the hymnbook or their mouths in praise to the God they are claim to “worship.” I personally suggest that, when singing a hymn or gospel song, the person sing heartily from the heart (see Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16), almost as though the person singing had written the words and composed the music making it truly *his* song! Every effort should be made to make each song as personal as possible and then to sing it from the heart doing so *heartily!* As one pastor-friend of mine used to remind his people, “When it comes to singing, you [i.e. the people] are not the audience. God is the audience as He listens to His people lift their voices in song!”

4. *Opening Prayer.* In most service the opening prayer is not synonymous with what has become known as the *pastoral* prayer. In some churches it may be led by one of the deacons or a member of the congregation. It is simply a time of invoking the Lord’s blessing on the proceedings asking that *He* be exalted and glorified in every part of the service. While this person is leading the congregation in prayer, the individual has the opportunity to actively participate.

This is not a time to listen to someone else talk to God, almost as though the individual is a bystander watching (in this case listening) to someone else do the participating. One should be joining in this prayer by listening carefully while whispering his own prayer to God asking for His blessing.

5. *Hymn.* See #2 above.

6. *Choir.* This is perhaps the only part where the worshiper is unable to *actively* participate. But it is a time where he can be blessed and challenged by the words of the choral arrangement as well as being uplifted by either the majesty of the music or its reverent, prayerful tone. Here is an opportunity to be ministered to through the ministry of music. When so blessed by a well-done, well-rehearsed choral rendition, a good, hearty “AMEN!” is in order. SO even the choral number does not have to be passive in the sense of merely sitting and listening. Get involved with your heart and, if you know the lyrics to a particular arrangement, sing them quietly in your heart to the Lord.

7. *Scripture Reading.* Sadly, this important item is often overlooked for sake of time. Frankly, I think that the reading of God’s Word, should be a part of *every* worship service. The matter of Scripture reading tends to go in three directions: 1) ignored, 2) the pastor or someone else reads and 3) responsive reading where the pastor reads the first verse followed by the congregation reading the next verse and so on throughout the selected passage. Responsive reading is what I personally prefer and enjoy as it gives the individual in the pew the opportunity to actively participate. I realize that sometimes this can create its own problem, particularly in a congregation where different translations are used by the people. In an effort to eliminate that problem some churches include the Scripture passage in the bulletin. But, may I say, that nothing takes the place of holding your Bible in your hands and reading from its pages. Reading from the Bible itself also has the added benefit of helping create a sense of respect and reverence for God’s Word.

8. *Pastoral Prayer.* You may ask, “How can I be a participant in the pastor’s prayer?” Allow me to respond with this thought. I realize that we do not actually speak out loud with an audible voice while the pastor is praying. But neither is it the time to rest your eyes or take a couple of minutes snooze! We should be listening intently as he leads the people in prayer; be completely aware

of what the pastor is saying and quietly send our heartfelt “agreements” heavenward.

9. *Announcements.* This is one area where a great deal of time is wasted in many churches. There are those churches where every announcement found in the church bulletin is read and reviewed. Quite unnecessary. People can read, so let them read the announcements for themselves. It should only be necessary to highlight two or three of the more prominent ones. It is not necessary to announce activities that are, sometimes, weeks down the road. An exception to this is the importance of, not necessarily “announcing” but rather highlighting important special events such as upcoming revival meetings, mission’s conference, etc. As each of those special events draws closer, different aspects of the event can be highlighted. How does this involve participation? By *listening and noting* those activities that involve you individually.

10. *The Offering.* This should be a special time in the service as we worship the Lord tangibly with our giving. The offering is not supposed to be like riding a train waiting for the conductor (in this case, the ushers) to come and pick up our tickets! It is a time when each believer has the opportunity to express to the Lord his heartfelt gratitude to the Lord for the many blessings He has bestowed. It is a time of *thanksgiving*, not only for what God has given and does, but *for Who He is!*

Years ago I found myself in a discussion with a friend who was in an exceedingly difficult financial situation. In the course of the conversation he casually mentioned that he was not tithing, to which I kindly responded, “Maybe that’s part of your financial problem. You haven’t been tithing and God hasn’t been blessing.” His response was, “But I can’t afford to tithe!” I reminded him of the importance of the tithe by saying, “No, you are wrong. You cannot afford *not* to tithe.” In this regard read Malachi 3; Luke 6:38; II Cor. 8:1-15; 9:6-7.

So then, the offering is not an interruption of the service, it is a vital part of the service and should be taken very seriously and joyfully!

11. *Hymn.* (See #2 above.)

12. *Special Music.* Here is an incredibly special part in the service for it provides individuals with various musical talents within the congregation to play an instrument or sing for the glory of God. May I suggest a couple of things here for your consideration. These may seem trivial to some, but I think they are worthy of consideration. 1) The area where the pulpit is located is called a platform, not a stage. A stage is a place performances take place. While one may *play or sing* during a worship service, he is not to be *performing*. 2) Handclapping after special music is disruptive to the atmosphere of a *worship* service. When a person goes to a concert to hear a particular performer, he buys a ticket. When the concert is over, the only way to express appreciation to the performer for his performance is by applauding. In such case, all the attention is put on the performer. However, the purpose of the worship service is to put all the attention on the One being worshiped, God. When people applaud, all of the attention is put on the performer for his performance, just like a regular concert. 3) Special music is *not* a time for little Johnny to toot his horn so all the family can come and see that he moved from Book One to Book Two. Young children need to be taught that providing special music (for the offering or otherwise) is a *ministry* not a performance. The best way to express appreciation when you have been blessed by a special number is to say an enthusiastic “Amen!” I think it is important to refer to the *ministry* of music instead of the music *program*.

13. *Sermon.* The time set aside for the preaching is not a time for lectures but a time for challenging Bible preaching. How does you participate in someone else’s public speaking? By listening carefully, by taking notes, by asking the Lord to speak to your heart, as He often does. Sometimes, the Lord speaks and touches hearts through a main point of the message and at other times, He speaks by means of nothing more than a side comment made by the preacher. I realize that it can be somewhat difficult at times to “stay awake.” That is why it is important to sit with good posture and try to be consciously aware of what is being said. This is not a time for glancing around to see who is there and who is missing nor is it a time allow yourself to be taken by other distractions as well (a fidgety child, people whispering to each other, etc.). The sermon time is when God speaks to individuals through the speaker filled and guided by the Holy Spirit. It is not only a time of learning; it is a time of application.

14. *Invitation.* Here we come to what is, perhaps, the most personal part in the worship service. The believer has worshiped God in all of the above ways

and now it is time to listen to that still small voice of the Holy Spirit. The invitation is not a time for the preacher to “prey” on people’s emotions; it *is* an opportunity for people to respond as the Holy Spirit has worked in lives. The preacher can use manipulations and crowd psychology to get people down the aisle, but it means absolutely nothing unless the Holy Spirit is in it. The invitation is a time for self-inspection as well as a time for prayer on behalf of others in the congregation to God may have spoken and who, yet, are hesitant to respond.

15. *Closing Hymn.* May I say that this is *not* a time to gather up your belongings and zip up your Bible in its case. That can wait for a moment or two more. Many a time it is when, during the singing of the closing hymn, that folks, saved and unsaved alike, respond and go forward making life-changing decisions. How others behave during this closing song can impact, positively or negatively, decisions in the lives of others that need to be made. Do not allow yourself to become a distraction at such a crucial time.

CONCLUSION

I think it safe to say that each of the above items does, or at least can, involve active participation, whether mental or physical. It is the desire of this writer that you, the reader, will take the matter of the “worship” service very seriously and ask the Lord to use it to minister to your heart next time you are in church.

The careful reader may note that I have made no reference to a time of “hand-shaking” and greeting others mid-way through the service, as is often done. While I am not opposed to such a practice, it is not a preference of mine for this reason. The worship service has begun, keeping in mind that *all* of the worship is directed to the One Who alone is worthy of such worship. However, this practice interrupts that worship and takes the focus off of the Lord (Who is to be the object of our worship) and places it on ourselves. It takes the emphasis off of the *vertical* and places it on the *horizontal*. Many times, when this type of greeting and handshaking takes place, the pastor has to call the people back to their seats so that they can “get on” with the rest of the service. Personally, I think there is ample time both before and after for folks to greet one another and enjoy that sweet Christian fellowship that is so important to the church family. Let us truly “*worship Him in the beauty of holiness.*”