

Transforming
WORSHIP

PLANNING AND LEADING
SUNDAY SERVICES AS IF SPIRITUAL
FORMATION MATTERED



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FOREWORD BY
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IT ALL STARTED AT SINAI



FOR THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS I have served as a consultant for churches seeking to improve the overall worship experience at their Sunday services. Though situations vary, churches typically bring me in to help them get from point A to point B. I put it that way because I've found that church leaders always have an idea of what point B looks like. In other words, they have a vision, an idea of what they want to see happen every Sunday at their church. If I've learned one thing from my experience doing church work, it's that everyone has a picture in their mind of what constitutes real or true worship. Some of our preconceived notions of worship are based on the church we grew up in or one we previously attended. We're comfortable with a certain style of worship simply because we're used to it; it's familiar to us. Some are attracted to a particular type of music; they can't engage unless the music is "right." Others have a notion of worship derived from a megachurch they visited or a conference they attended that featured a professional quality worship band.

I can't help but notice that most everyone's concept of worship, including my own, mirrors our personal experience and preferences. But what about God? What does God think about worship? We assume that if the worship feels right to us, it must feel right to God, which is

presumptuous. How do we know for sure how God feels about our particular brand of worship? Does God have a favorite style of music? Is the style of music even important to God?

Fortunately, God has revealed in his Word how he desires to be worshiped, and, surprisingly, it has little if anything to do with music. Exodus 1–15 presents the story of God rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This epic drama culminated in a meeting between God and his chosen people at Mount Sinai, during which God prescribed how he desires to be worshiped. In this chapter we will explore the foundational principles of corporate worship gleaned from Israel's encounter with God atop Mount Sinai and assess how to apply those principles to modern worship.

SINAI SCHOOL OF WORSHIP

As recorded in Exodus 3, Moses was tending sheep at Mount Sinai when God spoke to him through a burning bush and revealed his plan to rescue Israel from slavery. God promised Moses that after delivering his people he would bring them to the very spot where Moses

was standing, specifically so they could worship God

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(Exodus 3:12; 7:16).

Fast forward several years to the same location. God has led Israel out of Egypt and directed them to Mount Sinai, just as he promised (Exodus 19–32). Freed from the shackles of slavery, the people were now free to worship. But before they could do so, God established his covenant with them and offered instructions concerning how he wants to be worshiped.

After all, Israel had been entrenched in a pagan society for over four hundred years; judging from their actions in the desert, they no longer consistently reflected the piety of their faith tradition. For example, their constant complaining throughout their sojourn demonstrated a

blatant lack of trust in God, especially in light of all the miracles he performed to rescue them. The moaning and griping were pervasive; Scripture notes the frequency with which the entire community grumbled against Moses and Aaron (Exodus 16:2, 8; 17:2-4, 7). The most disgruntled among them longed for the comforts of Egypt even if it meant returning to slavery (Exodus 14:11-12; 16:3), which discloses an ignorance of their true identity. They were a nation destined for greatness, who, according to the Abrahamic covenant, would eventually bless all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-5; 17:1-8).

The Exodus account contains no indication that the people worshiped together during their six-week sojourn to Sinai. Except for a brief praise song they sang on the shores of the Red Sea (Exodus 15), the narrative mentions no regular worship observances. Apparently, gathered worship did not play a vital role in the ongoing life of the community. The Israelites had been subjected to the prevailing Egyptian culture for so long they had formed an incomplete concept of God, lost their identity as God's chosen, covenant people, and had no established routine for gathered worship.

At Mount Sinai, God was now calling these former slaves to be his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). In other words God was inviting them to be his specially chosen people and to partner with him in his global mission to redeem his fallen creation. God brought Israel to Sinai for what Samuel Balentine portrays as a sabbath experience—a furlough that began during the seventh week of the exodus, which lasted for eleven months (Numbers 10:11), and afforded the Israelites an extended time of deliberation to reflect on the implications of their covenant relationship with God. Because the concept of covenant plays a vital role in worship theology, a brief analysis of a typical Old Testament covenant is in order.

Covenants in antiquity. In the ancient world a covenant was a treaty or agreement between two parties; typically one party was superior to

the other. For example, a powerful king, nation, or tribe would enter into an official agreement with a weaker one. The stronger ruler was often referred to as “lord,” the weaker one as “servant.” The terms of the covenant bound the lord to protect the servant who in turn pledged unwavering allegiance to the lord, which meant going to war against the lord’s enemies as well as paying tribute to his authority. Alliances formed by a covenant, therefore, were politically and socially motivated.

A covenant transaction adhered to a standard protocol that began with a brief narrative chronicling the participants’ shared history. Terms of the agreement were then spelled out, the benefits, obligations, and responsibilities for both parties were clearly indicated. Punitive measures for treaty violations were also detailed. A physical sign, such as a scar, was often used to seal the agreement, and the lesser king or nation would be given a new name indicating that they were now owned, in a sense, by their new leader. Finally, the covenant was captured and preserved in a document that served to remind both parties of their pact.

Covenants in antiquity were typically ratified in a special ceremony that incorporated some type of blood sacrifice. Participants were either sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial animal or they would walk between pieces of the animal that had been cut up for the occasion, a ritual that communicated “May the gods cut me to pieces, should I violate the terms of this treaty.” Covenant partners sometimes shared a meal to ratify the pact. Although God also entered into covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:1-17), Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3; 15; 17:1-22), and David (2 Samuel 7:11-16), it was the agreement God initiated with Moses that profoundly influenced Israel’s approach to worship.

Sinai worship service. The ratification of the Mosaic covenant, recorded in Exodus 24, occurred in the context of a worship service. God, always the initiator in the human-divine relationship, summoned Moses so the Lord and he could meet before Moses met with the people (Exodus 24:1). Then Moses called the Israelites together and, following

God's previous orders (Exodus 21–23), began to share with them all the words that God spoke to him atop Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:3). What the text summarizes in one verse comprises four chapters of the book of Exodus (20–23). In what must have been a lengthy sermon, Moses taught the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and presented the terms of Israel's covenant agreement with God, known subsequently as the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22–23:33). Interestingly, the Book of the Covenant begins and ends with explicit instructions about worship: Exodus 20:22-26 calls for God's faithful to offer sacrifices on an altar; Exodus 23:10-12 commands them to observe weekly Sabbath. This passage also includes three festivals that God instructed them to observe annually—Passover, the Festival of Harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering (Exodus 23:14-19). Upon hearing God's instructions the congregation responded by vowing to obey God's laws (Exodus 24:3). The Sinai sermon, therefore, was substantive, was received as the word of God for his people, and elicited a response from them as well.

When Moses finished delivering God's word, he built an altar and offered sacrifices, both of which were activities God previously instructed him to do (Exodus 24:4-5). As part of the sacrificial ritual, Moses sprinkled the people with blood from the sacrificial oxen (Exodus 24:8), which, following ancient custom, bound covenant partners together in mutual loyalty. Therefore, Israel's ritual of animal sacrifice, the centerpiece of Old Testament worship, was inaugurated at Mount Sinai as an expression of their loyalty and commitment to God. The ceremony climaxed with Moses leading Israel's seventy elders up Mount Sinai to commune with God as God had earlier prescribed (Exodus 24:1, 9-11). Atop Sinai, Israel's leaders "saw God, and they ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11). They encountered God and shared a meal in his presence. Though Israel emerged from slavery as a ragtag tribe without a cogent religious identity and with no compelling vision for worship, they left Sinai for the Promised Land as what Balentine

characterizes as both a covenant community as well as a worshipping community. Indeed, God had personally schooled them regarding who he is, who they were, and how God desires to be worshiped.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WORSHIP AT SINAI FOR SUNDAY SERVICES TODAY

Robbie Castleman maintains that the Israelite's unique approach to worship distinguished them from all neighboring tribes and nations. Let's examine these distinctive features of worship derived from the exodus story and consider their implications for transforming worship gatherings. The foundational principles listed in this and the following chapter draw extensively from Constance Cherry's book *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*.

God-initiated meeting between God and his people. Sinai reveals that God is the one who initiates worship. God is the one who summoned Moses for a mountaintop meeting and then charged him with the responsibility of facilitating the larger gathering between God and his people. God also dictated the vital terms of the gathering. Instead of leaving the details entirely up to Moses, God determined the time, the place, and what everyone was to do when they gathered. Biblical worship is never on our terms—never about us and our personal preferences—but wholly on God's terms.

The fact that God initiates worship completely changes the dynamics of a church service. On Sundays we're not simply attending a church service; we're going, by divine invitation, to meet with God and his people. Gathered worship is more than a teaching time, more than a Christian sing-along; it is a divine invitation to encounter and experience God. Like the Israelites, we too have to carve time out of our schedules to enter into a Sabbath experience. As our Jewish ancestors made the arduous trek to Sinai, we too must exert the energy to travel to a specific place—our local church—to experience God's presence

among his people. All that we do during worship is in response to the divine presence, to God's self-revelation. Jesus taught that our heavenly Father is constantly looking for people ready and willing to meet with him (John 4:23-24). Sunday worship is fundamentally a meeting between God and his people, initiated by God himself. Every time we gather, we take God up on his holy invitation to come together with our brothers and sisters in Christ to fellowship with God.

Dialogical nature of worship. Moses shared with the people all that God revealed to him, and they responded. Gathered worship is essentially a dialogue between God and his people. God speaks, we listen and respond; we speak and God hears us, and he too responds. God reveals himself mainly through his Word; we respond verbally by singing or with actions. Constance Cherry emphasizes that while some methods for planning worship result in God being the topic of conversation, approaching worship as a dialogue enables God to be a partner in the conversation. Gathered worship is an encounter with a God who is an active conversationalist.

Healthy and constructive dialogue is never one-sided; it is not a monologue. Both parties actively participate in the conversation. To achieve this sense of dialogue in a group setting requires participation on the part of all involved. Biblical worship does not entail watching someone else converse with God or passively listening to a sermon; it requires all worshipers to take part in this dynamic dialogue with God. The fact that true worship is dialogical means that on any given Sunday God could say something significant and meaningful to us during the service.

Proclaiming who God is and what God has done. After God parted the Red Sea and the children of Israel crossed safely to the other side, Moses led the people in a spontaneous praise song. The Song of Moses, found in Exodus 15, is one of the first—if not the first—worship songs recorded in the Bible. This ancient praise song is about God and is sung to God. The lyrics are celebrative and triumphant, focusing on who God is and what God accomplished in delivering Israel.

In the first three verses God is exalted as “Lord,” “my strength,” “my defense,” “my salvation,” “my God,” and “a warrior.” Moses’ song celebrates who God is by highlighting some of his attributes. Verses 4-5 go on to describe how God hurled Pharaoh’s army into the water and subdued them. Linking God’s actions to his attributes underscores that God’s deeds flow out of who he is. The rest of Moses’ song goes back and forth between describing who God is and citing what God did to rescue Israel.

The Song of Moses illustrates that a fundamental task for gathered worshippers is to proclaim who God is and celebrate God’s marvelous deeds of deliverance. David too purposed to speak of the “glorious splendor” of God and to meditate on God’s “wonderful works” (Psalm 145:5). And according to Scripture, the main reason Christians gather is to declare the praises of him who called us “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Proclaiming who God is and celebrating all that God has done instills hope as we anticipate all that God is yet to do.

Focusing on God’s character and his actions also increases our appreciation for his incomparability. Midway through the Song of Moses the singers exclaim,

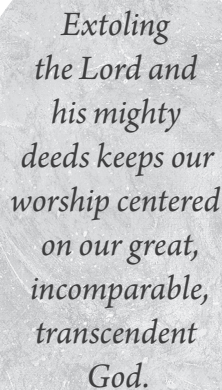
Who among the gods
 is like you, LORD?
 Who is like you—
 majestic in holiness,
 awesome in glory,
 working wonders? (Exodus 15:11)

God’s attributes and wondrous deeds prove that there is absolutely no one like our God; no one does the things he does. Extolling the Lord and his mighty deeds keeps our worship centered on our great, incomparable, transcendent God.

Expression of our covenant relationship with God. The Sinai worship experience allowed Israel to ratify its covenant agreement with God. The

essence of a covenant, as you recall, is that it establishes a relationship between two parties and clarifies their obligations and responsibilities toward each other.

Through the Mosaic covenant, God made a commitment to relate to Israel as his chosen people; they would be the recipients of his steadfast, loyal love (Exodus 20:6). To uphold their end of the agreement, the Israelites were asked to remain loyal to God and his ways. Thus, after Moses read the Book of the Covenant, the people responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” (Exodus 24:7). To remain in good standing with God, the people of Israel were expected to live lives of godly obedience and moral integrity. Israel’s worship, notes Castleman, was designed to be an expression of their unique identity as God’s covenant people.



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Christians, of course, live under the new covenant written in the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20). Israel consistently failed to live up to the terms of the Mosaic covenant, so God, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, promised to provide a new arrangement, which he would write on the hearts of his people (Jeremiah 31:31-33). The early church quickly realized that God had enacted this new covenant through Christ, for Jesus is the only one who truly fulfills God’s requirements for holiness and obedience. Jesus did not come to revoke the concept of covenant but to fulfill it on our behalf. By offering himself as the unblemished, sacrificial lamb (Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 1:19), Jesus takes on our covenant obligations—the ones neither Israel nor anyone else has ever been able to meet—and keeps the covenant in our stead. Under the new covenant God demonstrates his love, mercy, and grace through Jesus, whose blood was poured out for the forgiveness of sin (Matthew 26:28).

Worship is an expression of our covenant relationship with God. In the same way that Israel's worship affirmed their identity as God's people, Sunday worship defines Christians as people of God's new covenant written in the blood of Christ. Transforming worship encourages God's people to remain faithful to our commitment to follow Christ and helps us grow in our relationship with the Lord.

Reenacting God's saving acts of redemption. Israel's worship practices went beyond declaring God's deeds of deliverance and actually involved a vivid reenactment of them. Israel's worship practices revolved around remembering that God rescued them from bondage and then reenacting or re-presenting that deliverance. At Sinai, God prescribed a set of rituals and festivals for his people to observe as an expression of their covenant relationship with him. Each sacred act incorporated specific symbols combined with well-orchestrated actions and gestures to help Israel recall, relive, and commemorate God's redemptive, historical work in the world. God instituted Passover, for example, as a permanent feast designed to help his chosen people relive and commemorate the Hebrew slaves' last night of bondage in Egypt.

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Like Passover, the Lord's Supper also uses symbolism and gestures to help Christians relive the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Chapter five delves more deeply into the role that symbols and sacred acts play in spiritual formation; chapter nine details the spiritual implications of the Lord's Supper. For now, suffice it to say that symbols and sacred gestures are a means God has provided to help us reenact his story of redemption and deliverance during worship.)

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR TRANSFORMING WORSHIP

Israel's experience at Sinai discloses God's perspective on worship—that it is a meeting of God's people with God that God himself initiates and that the gathering is dialogical. Furthermore, every time we assemble, we have the privilege of proclaiming to each other and to the world who God is and all God has done. Public worship also allows us to renew our commitment to the Lord and to reenact—relive—God's cosmic story of deliverance.

Sinai's worship principles proved to be transformative. Our Hebrew ancestors heard God's word—the Ten Commandments and the rules of the covenant—which challenged them to live a different kind of life in allegiance to God and his ways. God's people offered burned sacrifices as evidence of their desire to follow the Lord. They also verbally expressed their intentions to obey. The purpose of worship is not spiritual formation per se, but that is the natural result of experiencing God. From its inception worship was designed to be a spiritually formative encounter with the Lord. For that reason, the guidelines God laid down at Sinai are foundational to a transforming worship service.

HOW ARE THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP MANIFESTED IN YOUR SETTING?

For those seeking a more formative approach to planning and leading worship, the five principles gleaned from Exodus give ample reason to pause and consider how to apply these concepts to our particular settings.

1. *God-initiated meeting between God and his people.* Do the people we lead sense that we are meeting with God when we gather on Sunday? Or are they coming to church merely to hear the pastor preach? Are there any prayers, songs, or Scripture readings we can incorporate to underscore that God is the one calling us to gather?

2. *Dialogical nature of worship.* How can we help the congregation understand and experience the verticality of worship? Are we giving them enough opportunities to speak to God? If so, how can we help them engage like they're speaking to God? What does it look like in our setting to give worshipers opportunities for God to speak to them? Could brief moments of silence or reflection help them hear from the Lord? How can we help congregation members personalize and apply what God is saying to them through his word?
3. *Proclaiming who God is and what God has done.* Do our services do an adequate job of proclaiming who God is and celebrating all that God has done and continues to do in the world? Though it's meaningful and appropriate to sing personal songs expressing love and devotion to God, do the lyrics we sing ever get out of balance and focus more on us than on the Lord? Do we present the full range of God's attributes over time, or do we keep emphasizing our favorites?
4. *Expression of our covenant relationship with God.* Do our services inspire worshipers to follow Christ? Do we call our people to faithful obedience to biblical Christianity? Do we invite believers into deeper intimacy with the Lord? How can we allow our people to express or renew their commitment to God?
5. *Reenacting God's saving acts of redemption.* How can we ensure that how we observe the Lord's Supper and baptism is spiritually formative? What are the spiritual implications of these sacred acts that we need to emphasize more? What can we do to help our people encounter Jesus in the Lord's Supper?

At Mount Sinai the Israelites learned how to worship God, and they became a nation of worshipers. I hope that churches today will apply the principles God revealed to our Hebrew brothers and sisters and discover what it truly means to be a worshipping community.

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