

The Worship of the Church

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This morning brings us to the end of our rather lengthy series on learning and obeying the will of God. The past couple of lessons have been punch-line lessons. In them, we've used the interpretive tools handed down to us by Jesus to learn what He wants His church to be like in the areas of organization and church finance. Although this teaching might seem rather dry to some, it is extremely important. There are literally thousands of different churches that have departed from the will of God in these areas, and if we follow them, we too will be found in rebellion against the King of heaven.

Of course, not every church rebellion arises in these two categories. It's equally common for churches to fail to pay attention to the Scripture in the area of worship. Just about anything you can think of, somebody is doing it in a church somewhere and claiming to do it in the name of God. My brother likes to tease me that I should go back to school to get my master's degree in liturgical dance. I've never so much as seen anybody dancing during church services, but apparently it's so common that now they offer advanced degrees in how to do it right. If we stumble across the right PBS documentary, we may well be equally bemused by the spectacle of charismatic worshipers barking like dogs and suddenly collapsing backward and passing snakes around. They claim to do those things in the name of God as well.

Ultimately, though, what matters is not how strange a worship practice may be to us. What matters is not how well it fits in with our sensibilities. What matters is how it obeys the will of God expressed in His word. If we worship in a way that is outside of the word, we can have the best of intentions, yet be piling up damnation for ourselves. It's critically important that we get things right when we assemble, so let's look for a little while at the worship of the church.

At Any Time.

Within this topic, there are three expressions of worship in which the Lord's people may engage at any time. The first of these is **SINGING**. We are commanded to sing to one another in Colossians 3:16. This is one of the places where those interpretive tools we talked about a few weeks ago become very important. God told us to sing, but He is silent concerning any other form of music in our worship. We saw that the silence of the Scripture is restrictive rather than permissive. If God didn't mention instruments of music, that means He didn't want us to use them in our worship. If we want to play them on our own for recreation, fine, but we are to praise the Lord with our voices only.

The distinction between the covenants is also very important here. Undeniably, under the Law of Moses, the Israelites were permitted and indeed commanded to use musical instruments in their worship. However, as we saw, the Law of Moses has been nailed to the cross and abolished. The Israelite practice of using musical instruments is irrelevant to our practice today. Similarly, we are commanded to sing to one another. God's model of worship does not involve a choir or a worship team singing up front while the congregation passively listens. Instead, every Christian is to be an active participant in the singing. It doesn't matter if we can't carry a tune in a bucket. God requires us to sing anyway. Only if we worship in this way, singing together without instrumental accompaniment, can we be pleasing to Him.

Whenever we wish, our worship may also involve **TEACHING THE WORD**. Paul instructs Timothy to do this in 1 Timothy 4:13. Of course, the reading that Paul mentions here is not just general literacy. Instead, he is referring to the public reading of Scripture. Along with this Scripture reading, we must also practice exhortation, that is, public speech in which we are encouraged to be righteous, and doctrine, that is, teaching about the Bible.

When we consider these three practices, it becomes obvious that they have a common element. All three are based around the word of God. There is no room in our worship for creed books or any other expression of human wisdom, no matter how useful or relevant it may seem. From my human perspective, I like Dave Ramsay. I think he has a lot of useful things to say about finances. However, we ought not be focusing our sermons or our studies on Dave Ramsay, because whenever we put the focus on him or anyone else, we take the focus off of God and His inspired word. The Bible can teach us financial wisdom too, but more importantly, only it can teach us the spiritual wisdom that we need to get to heaven. If we devote ourselves to the study of the word and the word alone, we will never regret it.

In all of our public assemblies, we should also practice **PRAYER**. Paul commands this in 1 Timothy 2:8. Sometimes, we treat prayer as an afterthought in our worship. We spend 45 minutes on studying, 10 minutes on singing, but only five on prayer. In the first century, prayer received a much greater emphasis. For instance, Acts 3 mentions "the hour of prayer," and although we may still sing about the sweet hour of prayer, few indeed are the times when we pray together for an entire hour. When we consider how much we have to praise God for and be thankful for, and how great our physical and spiritual needs are, this is tragic. We need to restore prayer to a prominent place in our worship. The leadership here hasn't worked out all the details yet, but I do know that just as this year, we're focusing on evangelism, next year our congregational focus is going to be on prayer, and I'm confident that if we devote ourselves to prayer as a congregation, it will be a blessing for all of us in ways that we haven't even imagined yet. Let's be a praying church.

On the First Day of the Week.

However, even though we may sing, study, and pray together at any time, there are certain kinds of worship that are only lawful on the first day of the week. The first of these is **THE LORD'S SUPPER**. Paul defines what the Lord's Supper consists of in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. This is one of the most familiar Scriptures to us in the entire Bible, and with good reason. It defines the solemn observance that we share in on a weekly basis. We do it to remember Jesus, who surrendered everything He had, even His own life, for us, and it gives us an opportunity to examine ourselves, to make sure that we are living as faithfully as His awesome sacrifice demands. There is nothing mystical about this ritual. We're just consuming ordinary bread and ordinary grape juice. Christ's words and our reflections are what give it significance.

We learn when our brethren in the first century partook of the Lord's supper from Acts 20:7. As all Christians today know, the unleavened bread we use isn't so soft that we can tear it to remove a piece. Instead, it's hard and somewhat crunchy, so we have to break it. This "breaking of bread" is precisely what Luke is describing in this passage. The Christians at Troas hadn't come together on the first day of the week to eat a common meal with Paul preaching for the entertainment. They came together to share in the Lord's Supper. Nowhere else in Scripture do we have any information about the Lord's Supper taking place at any other time, nor is there any indication that there were Sundays on which the brethren did not partake of the Lord's Supper. By this point, we know what the silence of the Scripture means. If we want to obey God, we must partake only on the first day of the week, and on every first day of the week.

Another Sunday-only expression of worship is the **CONTRIBUTION**. We learn this quite clearly from 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. Every first day of the week, we follow the example of the ancient Corinthians and set aside money as we have been prospered to further the Lord's work. This is yet another area where the silence of the Scripture is important. The contribution of its members is the only Biblical means that the church has to support itself. We never see any first-century churches hosting Bingo nights, raffles, or bake sales. We never see churches earning income from their holdings and investments. The contribution, and the contribution alone, is to be the source of funding for the church.

Even churches that avoid going down the path of the church-sponsored car wash often err in other ways in this arena. It is nearly universal in the denominational world for churches to teach that their members must tithe. Tithing is the contribution of 10 percent of income to the church, and just like the use of musical instruments, it is a practice that is unique to the Law of Moses. The Israelites were certainly commanded to tithe, but that command is not repeated anywhere in the New Testament. Nor do we ever have an example of a first-century Christian tithing. This is a road we've walked in this lesson already. A practice that is only part of the Old Law is not something that we can do today.

If that were not enough, under the law of Christ, tithing was actually replaced by a completely different system. Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7. Under the tithing system, the Israelites had to give 10 percent, no matter what, even if they were really angry and bitter about having to give that much to God. Today, though, the only requirement for our giving is that we should give as we have purposed in our hearts. We decide how much of our income we want to return to the Lord, and that's how much we should cheerfully give. If we feel that God has blessed us such that we ought to contribute 5 percent of our income to the work, that's fine. If we feel that 20 percent of our gross is the right number, that's fine too. Of course, in our contribution, we should never deprive ourselves and our families of what we need to live on. 1 Timothy 5 reveals that the man who does not support his household is worse than an unbeliever. However, beyond that, God wants us to be cheerful and generous, and we should be, because of all He's done for us.

Other Requirements.

Those five elements of worship are the only ways that God has told us to worship Him, but when we do those things, the Scripture also lays out two other requirements for them. First, our worship must be carried out **DECENTLY AND IN ORDER**. This requirement appears in 1 Corinthians 14:40. As Paul says earlier in the same chapter, if our worship is disorderly or chaotic, if an unbeliever visits our assembly, he'll conclude that we've lost our minds. Certainly, this is the impression that many charismatic assemblies leave. People believe that they are moved by the Holy Spirit to do all sorts of bizarre things, from speaking in tongues all at the same time, to spontaneously hopping up and marching in a procession around the auditorium. Not only does that weird us out, but it also goes against God's expectations. He is a God of peace, not of confusion, and when our worship is confusing, we do Him no service.

Finally, our worship must have **NO WOMEN AS LEADERS**. Even though the majority of churches today put women in positions of authority, that's not what the Scripture commands. Look with me at 1 Timothy 2:11-12. This passage could not be clearer. In the Lord's church, women are not to teach men, and women are not to exercise authority over men. It's entirely permissible for women to teach a children's class. There may be boys in that class, but there are no men present. Beyond that, though, when men are present, women cannot conduct the worship. This is not just some tradition that we thought up because we're chauvinists. From my own perspective, I couldn't care less whether women lead or not. However, when God says they cannot, that settles the issue, and we must obey Him.