

Worship – Orthodox or Contemporary?

Reading: John 4:24 “..those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth ¹...”

Introduction:

A couple of months ago, we asked the members of the congregation to nominate what topics they would like to hear covered in the sermons and/or bible class lessons. One of the requests was regarding worship, specifically, how did Christians worship in the first century, and do we need, or is it even OK, to change our worship to suit the modern generation? The aim of this lesson will be to try and answer both of those questions from the scriptures.

LESSON

1) “Worship” meetings of the first century Christians

a) Background principles

The New Testament does not give in one place a prescriptive list of what is to be done (or not done) when the church assembles together on the first day of the week. And so, because of this, I have heard over the years some people suggest that, basically, we are therefore free to do whatever we want as long as we have the Lord’s Supper and don’t do something that is prohibited in the scriptures. However, we need to keep the following principles in mind;

- What God wants us to do is not limited to just “explicit, prescriptive lists”. We can also learn what He requires of us through biblically approved examples. For instance, no-where in the Bible do we see an explicit command that the Lord’s Supper is to be held on the first day of the week. But what we do have is a biblical example² in **Acts 20:7** of the church coming together on the first day of the week to “*break bread*” – “*breaking bread*” in this context is generally accepted as meaning the Lord’s Supper.
- Secondly, there are times when, in order to get the complete picture of a particular issue, we need to find all the “pieces” in various passages of scripture. For example, the steps of conversion. There is no one place where all five steps – hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptised - are all listed together in the one place. You need to put together various passages of scripture to get the complete picture – e.g. **Romans 10:14, 17; John 3:16; Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36-39; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Peter 3:21.**
- A third principle is what we learn from **Matthew 7:21-23**. Belief and sincerity alone are not enough. We also need to do what God wants us to do, not what we think will be OK. The only way to know for sure what God wants us to do is to turn to His word (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**).

b) Biblical instructions and examples of church assemblies

So what does the Bible say about church assemblies? Well, I mentioned above that the church at Troas came together to “break bread” on the first day of the week. But one of the best places to go in the scriptures to find out

¹ All biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

² The inspired apostle Paul was present, and there is nothing in the text to suggest that what the church was doing in having the Lord’s Supper on this day was wrong.

Worship – Orthodox or Contemporary?

more on this topic is **1 Corinthians**. Chapters **11**, **14** and (indirectly) **16** all contain passages relating to church assemblies. You will notice a phrase that is repeated in chapters **11** and **14** – “*when you come together as a church*”, or words to that effect (**11:18; 14:23, 26**).

- In **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**, we have instructions regarding the Lord’s Supper. Note the following;
 - it was an activity that the church was to do together, not separately or haphazardly (**11:20-21, 33**).
 - it was not to be a meal designed to satisfy physical hunger and thirst (**11:22**)
 - it was to replicate what the Lord did on the night He was betrayed, and as per the instructions Paul had previously given them – a giving of thanks for the bread and the fruit of the vine³, a sharing of these items between the brethren, and doing so in remembrance of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection (**11:23-26**).
 - and finally, it was to be done in a thoughtful, reverential manner, with the understanding of its significance (**11:27-32**).
- In **1 Corinthians 14**, we can see what other activities took place in the context of the church coming together;
 - there was prophesying, or in modern terms, speaking and teaching the word of God (**14:6, 31**). This was to be done with one person speaking at a time, and in a manner that enabled the hearers to understand what was being said (vs. **6-11, 19, 26-31**).
 - there was speaking in tongues, but only if an interpreter was present to explain what was being said (verses **5, 13, 27-28**)⁴.
 - and by implication in verse **15**, there was singing⁵ and praying.

Note also the manner in which things were to be done;

- they were to edify the brethren (**14:5, 12, 26, 31**), *i.e.*, these things were to be done in a way that educated them, built up their faith, and encouraged them to draw closer to God.
 - the men had the leading roles (**14:34-35**).
 - and they were to be done in an orderly fashion – one thing happening at a time – and all with a sense of propriety (**14:40**).
- In the opening verses of **1 Corinthians 16**, we see the apostle Paul giving an instruction to the church at Corinth, the same instruction he had also given to the churches in Galatia. This instruction was the laying aside and collecting on the first day of the week a contribution for the work of the church. Now the phrase, “*coming together as a church*”, *etc.*, is not mentioned in this chapter, but first day of week is. Given that we have seen earlier that the churches came together to break bread on the first day of the week (**Acts 20:7**), then it is not hard to imagine that this act of giving was part of their meeting together.

³ **1 Corinthians 11:25** mentions “the cup”, but from the context of **Matthew 26:27-29; Mark 14:23-25**, this refers to “the fruit of the vine”.

⁴ Tongue speaking eventually ceased – **1 Corinthians 13:8**.

⁵ In **Ephesians 5:19**, we can see that we are to “... *speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs ...*”, *i.e.* singing to one another. If we are to do this to one another, then we need to be assembled together to do it.

Worship – Orthodox or Contemporary?

c) Information from contemporary writers

As well as the biblical accounts of the church meeting together, we can also get a glimpse of what the early church assemblies were like from people who lived during or near those times. One such person is Justin Martyr, a believer who lived during the second century - about 100 years after the church began. He wrote the following;

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours (i.e. "helps" – SK) the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

(Justin Martyr. *The First Apology of Justin*, app. 150 A.D.)

We need to keep in mind that this is not a Bible record, but it is a record of what an un-inspired believer, very familiar with the church assemblies of his day, wrote at the time. You will notice a very close similarity with what we found instructed in **1 Corinthians** about church assemblies;

- they met on the first day of the week, Sunday.
- there was the reading of scripture, followed by explanation and exhortation.
- there was the giving of thanks and participation in the Lord's Supper, although I am not sure what the water was for.
- there were prayers and free-will offerings.

So as far as we can tell, there is (generally) a consistency between the biblical accounts and secular accounts of what the early church did when it met together to worship God.

So what does this mean for us today?

Worship – Orthodox or Contemporary?

2) Our approach to worship

Jesus said in **John 14:15**; *“If you love Me, keep my commandments.”*⁶. These commandments were conveyed to the first century Christians through the apostles. After Jesus ascended to heaven, the Father sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles to remind them of the things that Jesus had said (**John 14:26**; **Acts 2:4**; **Galatians 1:11-12**). Therefore, the commands that the apostles gave to the church were the commands of God (**1 Corinthians 14:37**).

When it comes to the question of, *“Can we change the worship to suit the modern generation”*, let us consider **Romans 12:2**;

“Let us not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

The principle here is that it is we who need to change to suit the will of God, not the other way around. The focus is to be on what God wants, not on what we want. He saved us, and we are indebted to Him (**Romans 5:6-9**; **8:12-14**). This principle covers the whole of our lives, which includes our Sunday meetings and the manner in which we conduct them.

Now when it comes to Sundays, there are some things that are left to us to decide because there are no specific instructions or approved examples given in the scriptures to give us a definitive answer. For example, the time that we meet on Sunday, the place where we meet, the duration of our meetings, the number of songs and prayers we have, or the order in which the different activities are done. But whatever we decide regarding our meetings, there are criteria found in the scriptures that must be met;

- the men are to take the leading roles (**1 Corinthians 14:34-35**; **1 Timothy 2:8-14**),
- all of the activities must be aimed at edifying the brethren⁷ – *i.e.* building up their faith, and teaching and encouraging them to be more like Christ in their lives (**1 Corinthians 11:1**; **14:3, 12, 26**; **Philippians 3:8-15**),
- the teaching and preaching must be centred on the word of God, whether people want to hear it or not (**2 Timothy 4:2-4**),
- the songs that are selected should have a biblical teaching value (**Colossians 3:16**), and finally,
- the meeting should be conducted in a respectful and orderly manner that brings glory and honour to God (**1 Corinthians 10:31**; **14:40**).

When it comes to what may be called “contemporary worship”, there are too many versions of it to start listing things that may or may not be right with each version. But what I have aimed to give us in this lesson are the basic, biblical fundamentals that should be at the core of any decisions that we make about how we conduct our Sunday meetings.

God is to be at the centre of our lives, and both He and His will should therefore be at the centre of our worship.

⁶ See also **John 14:21a** & **1 John 5:2-3** to see the connection between love and obedience.

⁷ There is a difference between edification, and “*hyping up*” brethren to make them feel good. The latter usually only has a temporary, short-term effect. Edifying is about giving people a good solid foundation and faith – one that will help them through the difficult times.