



# JESUS' CHURCH: WORSHIP (1)

If organization is the skeleton of the body, worship is the heart. "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only" (Matthew 4:10b).

Two important aspects of worship are *what* is done and *how* it is done. Jesus told a Samaritan woman, ". . . true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23, 24). To worship God "in spirit" means to worship in one's heart. True worshipers think about what they are doing; they direct their thoughts heavenward. To worship God "in truth" includes worshiping Him as He has directed in His Word, for Jesus said that God's "word is truth" (John 17:17).

In this lesson and the next, we will examine what the Scriptures teach about the worship in Jesus' church. As we do so, we will stress both the "what" and the "how" of worship. The worship of God must include both the right acts and the right attitudes.

## THE SPECIAL DAY OF WORSHIP

We can worship God on any day of the week. When the church was first established, Christians met every day (Acts 2:46). Nevertheless, the New Testament teaches that there is a special day of the week on which all Christians should assemble for worship.

In the Old Testament, the special day of worship was the Sabbath Day, which was the seventh day of the week (Exodus 20:10, 11)—that is, Saturday. In Christianity, the special day is the first day of the week—Sunday. This was the day on which Christ arose from the dead

(Matthew 28:1, 6). This was the day on which early Christians met (1 Corinthians 16:2), the day they partook of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7). Sunday is called "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10).<sup>1</sup>

We will be studying five expressions of worship. Three of these can be done on any day: Bible study, prayer, and singing. Two are related only to the first day of the week: the Lord's Supper and giving.

## THE EXPRESSIONS OF WORSHIP

### Lord's Supper

The first expression of worship we want to consider is the Lord's Supper. During Jesus' last Passover<sup>2</sup> feast with His disciples, He instituted the Lord's Supper.

. . . the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner,<sup>3</sup> shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup (1 Corinthians 11:23–28).<sup>4</sup>

In instituting the Supper, Jesus used unleavened bread<sup>5</sup> and the fruit of the vine.<sup>6</sup> The participants in that first celebration of the Supper partook of both the bread and the fruit of the vine.<sup>7</sup>

When Jesus said, "This is My body," He did not mean that the bread had mysteriously and magically changed into His flesh. He was standing before them, His flesh intact. He meant what I mean when I pull a picture from my wallet and say, "Here are my grandchildren." The picture is a representation of my grandchildren. Even so, the unleavened bread is a representation of Christ's body, and the fruit of the vine represents His blood.

The Lord's Supper is sometimes called "communion" (1 Corinthians 10:16; KJV<sup>8</sup>) or "the table of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 10:21). Because it begins with worshipers breaking the unleavened bread, this expression of worship is also known as "the breaking of bread":<sup>9</sup> The first Christians "were continually devoting themselves to . . . the breaking of bread . . ." (Acts 2:42).

The New Testament church partook of the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week. The church met every first day (see 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). Their service revolved around the observance of the Lord's Supper. In Acts 20 we read that Paul, Luke, and others arrived in Troas. Luke later wrote, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, . . ." (Acts 20:7). When the congregation in Troas gathered on the first day of the week, their primary purpose was to break bread. Writings of Christians in the early centuries of the church indicate that this continued to be the practice for many years: As Christians gathered on each first day of the week, their primary focus was the Lord's Supper.

To please God in observing the Lord's Supper, it is important to do the right things: Christians should partake of both the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine, and they should do this on the first day of every week. It is also important to partake in the right way: Worshipers should concentrate their thoughts on the sacrifice of Jesus and what that sacrifice means to them. (Reread 1 Corinthians 11:26–29.)

### **God's Word**

When the church in Troas met to partake of the Lord's Supper, Paul talked to them about God's will (Acts 20:7).<sup>10</sup> Preaching or teaching God's Word is an important way to draw closer

to God. The early church often met to hear the Word read or discussed (Acts 2:42; Colossians 4:16).

The Bible places some restrictions on preaching during a public worship service. God's Word should be preached, not the opinions or philosophies of men (2 Timothy 4:1–4).<sup>11</sup> Only men should preach or teach in public assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:34).<sup>12</sup>

It is not enough, however, simply to observe the scriptural "what" of preaching and teaching. The fact that a preacher delivers a God-pleasing sermon does not guarantee that every listener is worshipping. Worship must take place in the heart of the listener. Each one present should participate in the preaching service by carefully listening and making application to his own life.

### **Prayer**

An important part of worship is prayer. Paul told Christians at Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Someone has said that when we read the Bible, God is talking to us, and when we pray, we are talking to God. In the New Testament, when Christians came together, they prayed (Acts 2:42; 4:23, 24; 6:6; 12:12).

Prayer is a vital part of both public and private worship. Every Christian should be constantly growing in his prayer life (Matthew 6:5–15; 14:23; Luke 5:16; Acts 10:9; 16:25).

Public worship generally includes a number of prayers led by men of the congregation. Paul wrote, "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension" (1 Timothy 2:8). The word used here for "men" is a special Greek word that means "men" in contrast with "women." Only men are to lead prayers in public worship services.

Again, the "what" of public prayer can be observed without actual worship taking place. The prayer leader must be aware of God's presence and direct his thoughts to God rather than men. Those being led in prayer should echo the prayer in their hearts and add their own petitions and thanksgiving. Then they can say "amen" (aloud or in their thoughts), and mean it (1 Corinthians 14:16; see also Matthew 6:13; Romans 16:27; Ephesians 3:21).<sup>13</sup>

## Giving

One way to express appreciation to God is by making a contribution<sup>14</sup> on the first day of each week. Paul told the church in Corinth,

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save,<sup>15</sup> as he may prosper,<sup>16</sup> so that no collections be made when I come (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2).

The Old Testament designated a specific percent for worshipers to give: 10 percent of all the worshiper had. This was called “the tithe” (Leviticus 27:30; Deuteronomy 14:22; Malachi 3:8–10). The New Testament does not specify a certain percent for Christians to give. Rather, it teaches that they are to give willingly, liberally, and cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:6, 7), “in keeping with [their] income” (1 Corinthians 16:2; NIV). I know Christians who give 10 percent or more of what they earn, but they do this out of gratitude, not because of coercion.

One could give “as prospered” and still not worship. As the worshiper makes his contribution, he should pray, thanking God for his blessings and asking God to accept his gift.

## Singing

A fifth expression of worship is singing. Paul commanded the church at Colossae, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). We will leave our discussion of singing until the next lesson, but the passage emphasizes the “what” of worship: “teaching and admonishing one another . . . with hymns” and “singing . . . to God.” It also stresses the “how” of worship: “with thankfulness in your hearts.”

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WORSHIP

We have discussed the New Testament teaching about worship, with emphasis on public worship. Now we need to ask, “Does it make any difference whether or not we gather together for worship?” Many think that attending worship services regularly is unimportant. What does the Bible teach? Some are surprised to

learn that God has spoken on this subject.

The Book of Hebrews was written to Christians who had once been faithful (Hebrews 10:32–34). For some reason, they had become indifferent and neglectful (Hebrews 2:3). This included their attendance at the public meetings of the church (10:25). They were told “to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (10:24). One way that could be done was by encouraging one another when they came together. Thus we read these words: “*Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near*” (10:25).<sup>17</sup> For people today, “the day drawing near” is the second coming of Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Christ could come at any time, so we need always to be ready (Matthew 25:13).

Those who become haphazard in attendance usually become haphazard in other areas of their Christian life. Hebrews 10:26–31 warns against this:

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

We have read in the Scriptures that Christians are to partake of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of every week. Most congregations also have regular meetings at other times during the week for the purposes of edification and fellowship. One who has given his life to Christ will want to attend all of these that he can. They will accelerate Christian growth, and they will help him to stay focused on what is really important.

## CONCLUSION

You have learned enough about New Testament teaching on worship to formulate questions to use in examining any religious group. For instance, you could ask, “Does it have the Lord’s Supper on the first day of each week?”;

“Are its preachers faithful proclaimers of God’s Word?”; “Do only men lead in the worship?”

As you make examination, do not neglect the personal examination of your own heart. Ask yourself, “Do I enjoy worshiping God with Christians?”; “When I come to the assembly, am I ready to worship?”; “While I am there, do I really worship?”<sup>19</sup> These are important questions. ❖

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<sup>1</sup>Early uninspired Christian writers confirmed that John was speaking of the first day of the week when he used the phrase “the Lord’s day.”

<sup>2</sup>The Jews had a feast called “Passover,” which commemorated God’s “passing over” their houses when He brought a plague upon the Egyptians (see Exodus 12).

<sup>3</sup>The emphasis is not on personal worthiness (no one is worthy enough to partake), but on the *manner* in which one partakes. To partake in an “unworthy manner” indicates that, as he partakes, the Christian is not thinking about the sacrifice of Jesus and his heart is not full of appreciation.

<sup>4</sup>See also Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19, 20.

<sup>5</sup>Only unleavened bread was used in the Passover feast (see Exodus 12:15).

<sup>6</sup>See Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18. Today, the phrase “fruit of the vine” could be used to refer to various juices; but in that time and place, it meant grape juice.

<sup>7</sup>In some religious organizations, only a select few partake of the juice, while the rest receive only the bread. This violates the New Testament pattern.

<sup>8</sup>The NASB has “a sharing.”

<sup>9</sup>In the New Testament, the phrase “breaking of bread” can also refer to a common meal. The context determines whether a common meal or the Lord’s Supper is meant.

<sup>10</sup>We do not know exactly what Paul said to them, but we know that God’s Word was always on his lips. For an example of what he told other Christians on the same journey, see Acts 20:31, 32.

<sup>11</sup>It should go without saying that the preacher must first believe that the Bible is from God. Unfortunately, some denominational pulpits are filled by men who do *not* believe in the inspiration of the Bible.

<sup>12</sup>See also 1 Timothy 2:8, 11, 12. The New Testament allows women to teach in certain situations (Acts 18:26), but women are not to teach or preach when the church comes together for worship.

<sup>13</sup>A simple definition of “amen” is “so be it.” It is not simply a word “to end a prayer.” For instance, if you agree with something the preacher said, you could indicate this by saying “amen.”

<sup>14</sup>This is normally a contribution of money, but it could be a contribution of other commodities.

<sup>15</sup>At first reading, this may sound like each individual Christian was to set his money aside privately. This would, however, necessitate the very thing Paul was trying to avoid: taking up a collection when he came. This was a “collection” that the church was to make (v. 1) so that it would not be necessary to make “collections” when Paul came (v. 2). The effort to “put aside and save” must therefore have been a public church activity with the money being put into a common fund (sometimes called “the church treasury”).

<sup>16</sup>“As he may prosper” refers to whatever is earned. You can “prosper” in the biblical sense without being “prosperous” as we use the word today.

<sup>17</sup>Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup>Some think that, for the original readers of the Book of Hebrews, this “day” was the destruction of Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup>I must add a special note for mothers of small children: It is hard to worship when your children are small, but do not let this deter you from faithful attendance. Do the best you can during the service. God will understand, and you will be bringing up your children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

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