



Preparing Souls To Serve The Lord

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True Worship: Defined By Its New Testament Practice

By
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In the April 1999 issue of the *Harvesters*, a study was made concerning the vocabulary used in the New Testament to convey the ideas that are expressed in the English word “worship.” In addition to the basic meanings of those words and the implications of them in their contexts, one can learn a great deal about true worship by noting both the approved and unapproved teachings of its practice in the New Testament. Below are listed three truths concerning the practice of worshipping God:

1. Worshipping God Acceptably Involves the Proper Attitude And Authority

Jesus makes clear to the Samaritan woman that if worship is to be acceptable to God, it must be done “in spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:23-24). This context indicates that “in spirit” refers to the human spirit. Acceptable worship, therefore, must be characterized by the appropriate attitude. The acts of worship are not worship in and of themselves “apart from the involvement of the inner person.”¹ The proper involvement of the inner person requires an attitude of humility, a desire to please God, and a cooperative spirit to conform to His will. Only when this attitude is present may one worship God acceptably. However, “in spirit” is only half the

equation.

Acceptable worship is also to be regulated by the proper authority. “In truth” means that worship is to be done according to God’s word (cf. Jn. 7:17; 2 Jn. 4). Only in accordance with divine authority can worship be acceptable to God (cf. Col. 3:17). If worship lacks the proper attitude and/or the proper authority, it is “vain” (i.e. to no purpose) (Matt. 15:9), it is worshipping “ignorantly” (i.e. “being mistaken” or “in error”²) (Acts 17:22-23), or it is “will worship” (i.e. self-chosen) (Col. 2:20-23). Obviously, such worship cannot be acceptable to God.

2. Worshipping God Acceptably Involves the Proper Actions

God reveals “in truth” a set of approved actions for worship. The total teaching of the New Testament authorizes only singing, praying, teaching, giving, and partaking of the Lord’s Supper as acts of worship. This proposition can be proven by the following syllogism:³

1. All total situations the component parts of which are scriptural are total situations which are scriptural.

2. The total situation described by the proposition “The New Testament authorizes only singing, praying, teaching, giving, and

partaking of the Lord’s Supper as acts of worship” is a total situation the component parts of which are scriptural.

3. Therefore, the total situation described by the proposition, “The New Testament authorizes only singing, praying, teaching, giving, and partaking of the Lord’s Supper as acts of worship” is scriptural. The major premise of this proposition is self-evident and cannot be rationally denied. The minor premise is also true because the New Testament authorizes one to sing (Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16), to pray (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 2:8), to teach (Acts 2:42; 20:7), to give on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:1-2), and to partake of the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week (Acts 2:42; 20:7) as acts of worship. As a matter of “private devotion and personal choice,” such items as fasting, diet, and special days are permitted (cf. Matt. 6:16-18; Acts 13:2; 14:28; Rom. 14:1-23), but they are not bound.⁴ The five acts of worship mentioned above, however, are bound upon all.

It should not be surprising that acceptable worship involves these five acts. Worship has always required specific action. Worship has always had a “starting place and a stopping place” (cf. Gen. 22:5; Judg. 7:15; 1 Sam. 1:19; 2 Sam. 12:20; Isa. 66:23; Zech. 14:16; Matt. 2:2; 15:25; Acts

8:27; 24:11; Rev. 3:9; 15:4).⁵ Only when one has the proper attitude (“in spirit”) and does the proper acts (“in truth”) can his or her worship be acceptable to God.

3. Worshiping God Acceptably Is not a Form of Entertainment

It is unfortunate that this issue needs to be addressed, but some in the church of Christ seem to have worship confused with entertainment. While it is true that worship should be enjoyable to all worshipers, its focus is not upon pleasing the flesh. Worship is not a “spectator / performer situation with the congregation in the spectator role while the preacher and song leader are performers.”⁶ This should be obvious, but based upon the gimmicks promoted in some congregations, this truth is either not realized or not accepted. Unauthorized innovations to worship “mask” themselves as being “spiritual,” when in reality they are “the desire for entertainment and emotionalism.”⁷ However, the “very nature and design of Scriptural worship appeals to the spirit, not to the flesh.”⁸ Christians must know the difference between acceptable worship and entertainment.

Additional Principle Necessary for Evaluating A Worship Practice

Having briefly ascertained the Biblical pattern for New Testament worship, it is necessary to understand two related principles in order to accurately evaluate a practice done in a worship service. The knowledge and application of these principles could prevent some unnecessary divisions in the body of Christ. Too many congregations divide over dogmatic opinions that are not matters of biblical authority.

1. “Inherent” Sin Versus “Instrumental” Sin

“Inherent” means “by nature.” Some things are wrong by

their nature. For example, the “works of the flesh” are by their very nature wrong (Gal. 5:19-21). There can never be a circumstance that allows the practice of “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, etc.” with God’s approval. The “fruit of the Spirit” is inherently good (Gal. 5:22-23). By their very nature, it is always good to practice “love, joy, peace, etc.” Understanding the “inherent” principle will allow one to focus on the real issue in many situations—expediency. Although rebellion against God is inherently sinful, it often manifests itself through means that are not sinful of themselves.

“Instrumental” means “by its use.” Many things are neither right nor wrong by their nature, but the manner in which they are used (expediency) determines whether they are right or wrong. For example, there is nothing inherently wrong with eating meats (1 Tim. 4:3b), even if they have been used in idolatrous ritual (1 Cor. 8:4-6, 8). However, if the eating of meat violates one’s conscience or causes a member in Christ to stumble, then the eating of meat is sinful (Rom. 14:13-23; 1 Cor. 8:7, 9-13; 10:23-33). Other Biblical examples of actions that may be instrumentally right or wrong are giving to the needy, praying, and fasting (cf. Matt. 6:1-18). If these things are done “to be seen of men” they are wrong, but if they are done as devotions to God, they are right.

The application of the “instrumental” principle to worship is two-fold. First, it indicates that a God-approved act of worship can be done in a wrong manner, thus resulting in sin (cf. Isa. 1:11-15). For example, the Corinthians came together on the first day of the week to partake of the Lord’s Supper; however, the manner in which they partook of it was sinful (1 Cor. 11:17-22, 27-34). They sinned by the way they “used” the Lord’s Supper. Second, something which is not inherently wrong can become sin

by its unauthorized or inexpedient use. For example, there is nothing inherently wrong with having a chorus perform in a church building, even if that performance occurs on the first day of the week. However, if the performance is advocated (intentionally or unintentionally) as a period of worship, then others are led to believe that it is alright to worship God with a chorus. In such a case the chorus performance is instrumentally sinful (cf. 1 Cor. 10:23-24).

2. Truth and Tradition in Worship

“Tradition” is neither good nor bad of itself. The word literally refers to “that which is handed down.”⁹ The source of a tradition and/or how it is used determines its approval from God. If the source of tradition is divine, then it is binding upon all (cf. 1 Thess. 1:15; 3:6). If a tradition’s source is human, then it may or may not be acceptable to God. If such tradition replaces God’s will, then it is sinful (Matt. 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13). However, if a human tradition is not inherently sinful and is used expediently in carrying out God’s will, then it is acceptable to God (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23).

There are two basic errors concerning the relationship of human tradition and truth. First, some err by promoting human tradition as if it is God’s word. This was an error of the Pharisees (Matt. 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13).

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This is also the error of those who want to change God-authorized acts of worship by claiming that scriptural worship services are mere tradition. The Samaritan woman made a similar mistake (Jn. 4:20). She spoke of worship as if it were a matter regulated by human tradition ("our fathers" opposed to "ye say"). She tried to "change the issue of truth versus tradition to tradition versus tradition."¹⁰ Some people attempt to do the same today. Some refer to acappella singing in worship as mere human tradition. According to their error, a mechanical instrument in worship should also be accepted because it is a "modern" tradition. However, the kind of music God authorizes in worship is not a mere matter of human tradition—it is a matter of truth! God has only authorized singing in worship (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16 et al.). It is erroneous to make truth a matter of human tradition.

Second, some err by supposing that changing from one lawful human tradition to another lawful human tradition is changing God's law. Worship services are filled with human traditions. Such things as times of services, order of services, songs, and song books are matters of human tradition. These are neither right nor wrong of themselves. As long as human traditions do not violate God's will and are used expediently they are good. However, human traditions must not be considered immutable. It is scriptural, and sometimes necessary to change human traditions in order to reach one's contemporaries with the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-23). Any change in worship, therefore, must be properly evaluated. If it is merely an expedient change in human tradition, then it must not divide the church. However, if it is a change in God's authorized pattern then it must not be tolerated. When human traditions are in conflict with truth, truth must always be allowed to reign (cf. Jn. 8:31-32; 12:48).

Conclusion

Worship is a "watershed" issue in the church today. All must realize that if God has not authorized worship then there is no basis for it. However, if God has authorized worship, then its practice must be regulated by His word, the Bible. Since God has authorized worship (Jn. 4:24), it is necessary for all to respect and practice only what the Bible authorizes in worship. Only in this way can people be pleasing to God and have true unity with one another.

Endnotes

¹ Gary Workman, "What is Worship?" The Spiritual Sword 24.2 (1993): 9.

² Rudolf Bultmann, "ἀγνοέω, ἀγνόημα," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 1, Gerhard Kittel ed., G. W. Bromiley trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 115.

³ Adapted from Jackie M. Stearsman, Topical Bible Studies: Interpretation Principles Applied (Lakeland, FL: Florida School of Preaching, 1994) 19.

⁴ Stearsman 19.

⁵ Gary Workman, "What is Worship?" The Spiritual Sword 24.2 (1993): 8.

⁶ A. Albert Reeves, "Worshiping God in Spirit and Truth," The Midway Exchange [monthly bulletin of the Midway church of Christ, Trenton, TN] Feb. 1995: 2.

⁷ Jim Chamblee, "Truth and Tradition in Worship," Worship in Spirit and Truth: Freed-Hardeman University Lectures, David Lipe ed. (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman University, 1994) 32.

⁸ Curtis A. Cates, Worship: Heaven's Imperative, or Man's Innovations? (Memphis, TN: Cates Publications, 1993) 17.

⁹ Klaus Wegenast, "παράδίδωι [and παράδοσις]," The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, vol. 3, Colin Brown ed. (1978; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 774.

¹⁰ Chamblee 32.

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By
Brian Kenyon

Please be advised that we have recently changed our website address. Although we are maintaining the same basic website, this new address (fsop.net) should be easier to remember. Our goal for the website is consistent with the purpose of the school, namely, to teach the word of God to others. Among other items, our website contains our school catalog, registration forms, order forms for school publications including our lectureship books, and Harvester articles dating back to September 1996. If you have not visited our website lately, please take a look. If you have friends and acquaintances with computers, why not give them our address? A person can learn many truths that can positively affect his or her eternity! Remember, **fsop.net**

We would be remiss at this point if we did not give the proper recognition to Jean-Louis Guay of Computer Help Desk Incorporated (chdi.com) in Columbus, Ohio. Not only did he willingly design our website in 1996, he also patiently and cooperatively maintained it until suffering a stroke in 1997. While recovering from a stroke, he taught us how to maintain the site. In short, Jean-Louis "put us on the [cyber space] map," and for this we are deeply appreciative.

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Check Classes Desired Classes Marked with "*" Are Taught at Extension Locations

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Monday			
___ 8:30 to 12:00	Romans 21361	Davis	3
___ 1:00 to 4:15	Logic 31370	Kenyon	3
___ 7:00 to 9:30	Topical Bible Studies 11334 (High Springs)*	Burgett	2½
___ 7:00 to 9:30	Survey of Old Testament 21360 (Sarasota)*	Stilwell	2½
Tuesday			
___ 8:30 to 12:00	Greek 21322	Stearsman	3
___ 1:00 to 4:15	Pentateuch 11364	Stilwell	3
___ 7:00 to 9:30 p.m.	Matthew 31389 (Bushnell)*	Stearsman	2½
___ 7:00 to 9:30 p.m.	Miracles and Parables 11316	Blackman	2½
Wednesday			
___ 8:30 to 12:00	Revelation 21359	Stearsman	3
___ 1:00 to 4:15	Church History 21341	Kenyon	3
Thursday			
___ 8:30 to 12:00	Computers and Churches 31387	Stearsman	3
___ 1:00 to 4:15	First & Second Corinthians 11335	Davidson	3
___ 7:00 to 9:30 p.m.	Wisdom Literature 21348	Kenyon	2½
Friday			
___ 8:30 to 12:00	Denominational Dogmas 11331	Daugherty	3
___ 1:00 to 4:15	First & Second Thessalonians 21337	Kenyon	3

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