

ACCEPTABLE CORPORATE WORSHIP

Lesson 9

Essentials and Patterns for Corporate Worship

Confusion often reigns in the minds of true, committed believers because they are not able to distinguish in their minds the difference between *function* and *form* in worship. Function relates to the content of worship that never changes. Form relates to how worship is done in any given culture or generation and is always subject to change. Function deals with the basics, the fundamentals of worship. There are some biblical criteria for corporate worship that can never change. Again, the regulative principle says that only the Bible should be used in forming one's view of corporate worship.

THE UNCHANGING FUNCTION OR CONTENT OF WORSHIP

The first question that must be asked is what does the Scripture command as to the very essentials of worship? What may not be commanded but seems to be laid down specifically by biblical principle? In other words, what are the things that must show up in corporate worship in order to be biblical?

Necessary Functions. There are five basic functions that are absolutely essential for effective corporate worship – teaching (doctrine), fellowship, the Lord's Table, prayer and praise.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

Teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Table, prayer and praise (worship) are fundamental and without them there is no corporate worship that is pleasing to God. What form these basic functions take in a worship service is a matter of culture, taste and preference.

These five fundamental points of worship do not have to occur in every gathering of Christians or in every worship service for Christians to offer acceptable worship to God. They do, however, have to be practiced by a local church generally to offer acceptable worship. Obviously, corporate worship can be offered to God at a prayer meeting with no teaching, or the Lord's Table does not have to be observed every Lord's Day. Yet, without these disciplines occurring generally in the local church, there can be no true worship of God.

Preaching/Teaching. Every worship service is to have the Word of God either preached (exhortation) or taught (content). The Apostle Paul declared preaching was *entrusted* to him by God. **“And at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior” (Titus 1:3).** This verse may lend weight to the primacy of preaching in a worship service.

“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and encourage”(2 Tim. 4:2).

“Until I come, devote yourself to . . . preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13).

“For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will (counsel) of God” (Acts 20:27).

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16).

“Teach and preach these principles” (1 Tim. 6:2).

Preaching or teaching is to be from the Bible, and people are to know the truth because it is impossible to live by truth one does not know. It is to show how to apply truth to life by faith-obedience. It is to be from the whole counsel of God, declaring the whole will of God, for all truth is relevant for the Christian (Acts 20:27). It is to be honest with no compromise to soothe the whims and sinful patterns of people. All preaching and most teaching are to be under girded with exhortations to act, and people are to be warned of the consequences if they do not act on the truth. Preaching and teaching are to exalt God and not man. They are to center on Christ and His work not man and his work. They are to show how the Holy Spirit applies truth to the believer as he or she by faith responds to truth, and not how the believer’s pseudo faith manipulates God to meet human whims and desires.

Reading of the Scriptures. Scriptures are to be read from both the Old and the New Testaments so the saints can become familiar with the whole counsel of God.

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture. . .”(1 Tim. 4:13).

Public prayer. Public prayer, whether done by a pastor or by the congregation is the pattern for corporate worship.

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

Liturgy and Confessions. While this is not as nearly clear in the Bible, it seems to be something the early Christians practiced.

**“He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed in the world,
was taken up in glory.” (1 Tim. 3:16)**

“Here is a trustworthy saying:

**If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
If we endure,
we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
If we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
For he cannot disown himself.” (2 Tim. 2:11-12)**

As early as Acts 13, we see liturgical worship. The Book of Acts was written around 63 A.D., so liturgical worship in some form was possibly occurring around 50 A.D.

“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2-3).

In the Church of Antioch, the prophets and teachers were gathered. They were worshipping the Lord and fasting (Acts 13:2). In various translations of the Bible, this word “worshipping” is translated “ministering,” or “praying.” The Greek word for “worshipping” is *leitourgounton*, which comes from the word *litourgia*. “The word “liturgy” grows out of this use” (A.T. Robertson, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Acts, III, p 178). It becomes obvious that the word refers to some kind of liturgy, and was probably liturgy based on Old Testament Scripture and Christian oral tradition. While they were going through the liturgy in worship, the Holy Spirit spoke to the leaders so as to set apart Barnabas and Paul to be missionaries to the Gentiles (Acts 13:3). The Holy Spirit spoke to these leaders while doing liturgical worship.

Surely, liturgy has its place in worship. Often Christians rebel at dead liturgy because of the dead, cold, stilted churches they attended before conversion to Christ. Yet, it is not dead liturgy if based on the Word of God, but dead people trying to repeat

the living Word without a changed heart. There is value for the individual Christian and the church corporately to have familiar liturgy and confessions. However, Acts 13 does not tell us what the liturgy actually was, but we can assume it was based on Scripture. Nor are we told that they did this liturgy every time they met. It appears this was by Divine design so that the early Christians and all Christians would not fall into rote repeating of liturgy with no mind or heart in it. Also, we need to remember that the early Christians had the Old Testament for their Bible and oral tradition about Christ and Christianity. Therefore, memorization and liturgy were given a high place in early church worship.

The Sacraments. The sacraments or ordinances of water baptism and the Lord's Table are essential to corporate worship when they are practiced in the church.

Sharing and Exhortation. Not all Christians would agree that sharing and exhortation are necessary for Biblical corporate worship, but the Bible seems to connect exhortation with the public assembly of the local church.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another. . .” (Heb. 10:24-25).

It was an Old Testament practice for the saints to praise their God among the people and in the great assembly of the saints.

“I will praise you forever for what you have done; in your name I will hope, for your name is good. I will praise you in the presence of your saints.”(Psa. 52:9).

“I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips as you know, O LORD, I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and salvation” (Psa. 40:9-10).

“I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the LORD, praise him” (Psa. 22:22-23).

Sharing may not fit into most Sunday morning worship services because of time and a tight order of worship. However, sharing could take place in the evening service or in small groups during the week.

Any person in the congregation should have the liberty to share without censure if there is the prompting of the Spirit to do so. Obviously every Christian won't share every week and some might share more than others but all should share at some time. However, no person should be made to feel awkward if he or she does not share. Some personalities are very private and it takes a long time to get up the nerve to share. Sharing should be something God is doing in one's life now not something that happened

ten years ago. A person who is burdened with some problem should have the freedom to share without the fear of censure.

God has commanded Christians to gather together at least weekly to encourage one another. Yet, ironically the one hour or so a week Christians gather together as brothers and sisters, they are, in the modern church, prohibited from interaction during the worship service. This needs somehow to be corrected.

Singing. A very significant part of the Christian's praise to God is through his singing. Singing was definitely part of the worship in New Testament times.

“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19).

This verse is in the context of the Ephesian local church so it can apply to singing in the worship service. Notice the things to be sung are psalms (Scripture with musical instruments), hymns (doctrinal songs based on sound theological concepts) and spiritual songs (probably a reference to “new songs,” mentioned frequently in the Psalms, being close to what we would call praise songs today).

The important thing to note is that they were singing to one another about God. A horizontal relationship with one another brought a vertical relationship corporately with God. This was a way of lifting their minds and emotions to the sovereign Christ.

Order. The New Testament corporate worship services had order. It was not a free spirited service without any control or continuity.

“But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40).

PATTERNS FOR CORPORATE WORSHIP

Just as the New Testament writings were built upon the Old Testament writings, so New Testament public worship is built to a large extent on Old Testament worship patterns. There is some continuity between Israel's worship and our worship as Christian. The church is spiritual Israel under the New Covenant. New Covenant worship by the church is different because it is spiritual worship and not related to the physical senses *per se*. However, there are many principles of Old Testament worship that carry over into church worship.

New and Old Testament Worship. First century Christian worship was born in the context of the Jewish temple and synagogue. For the first seven years of the Christian church, there were no Gentiles who were Christians. The early church had a Jewish culture, was made up of converted Jews and proselytes, and had only the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures. Yet, while Christianity had Jewish origins, from the very first, it had its distinctly Christian aspects. Many things were retained from Jewish worship, but the main emphasis and concern was for proper recognition of Jesus Christ as the God-

Man, the Messiah, and a proper worship of Him. All aspects of Jewish worship that did not allow for the finished work of Christ, his resurrection, his ascension, and the exaltation of Him as the Messiah were eliminated. Jewish liturgy was purged of all elements of worship that did not give Christ His proper place, but much of the liturgy was retained, which shows us the early Christians were not opposed to liturgy as such.

New Testament Worship and the Synagogue. Early Jewish Christians did not pattern their local church worship after that of the temple but that of the synagogue because they saw all the facets of the temple as a type of Christ and the church. Elders ruled the synagogue and the form of worship was quite simple. Synagogue means “gathering” or “gathering place,” and while it was a place of prayer, it was primarily known as a place of instruction, where the Law was expounded to the people. There was a definite order of worship in the synagogue. First, there was the call to worship known as the *Shema*, which was a confession of the unity or oneness of God. This call to worship included three passages of Scripture – Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:31-47. Christians dropped the *Shema* because it did not give a proper place to Christ, but a call to worship was retained in Christian liturgy. Second, there were prayers called the *Shemoneh esreh* that was a cycle of eighteen prayers and the congregation ended each prayer with an “Amen”. Third, there was the reading of the Law and the Prophets and this was so designed that within three years the whole Old Testament was read. Fourth, there was the sermon that was usually given by the Rabbi, but anyone in the congregation might be asked by the Rabbi to preach or anyone might ask the Rabbi for the permission to preach. Interspersed in the order of worship was the chanting of hymns and the Psalms. Lastly, came the benediction pronounced by the Rabbi and the congregation responded by a hearty “Amen.” There was people participation in synagogue worship and yet the whole service was structured but very simple.

The early Christians patterned their worship after that of the synagogue. There was a call to worship, reading of Scripture, chanting of Psalms, common prayer, an exposition of the Scripture (sermon) and a benediction. The Christians also attached the Lord’s Table to their worship in order to remember Christ. New Testament worship was not highly liturgical but very simple, centering on Christ and the written Word. Worship had to be simple and informal if it was done in homes. For 200 years Christians met in homes.

Place of Worship. In the very beginning of the Christian church, the early Christians continued to worship in the temple (Lk. 24:53; Acts 2:45). Obviously they had no hang ups about meeting in a building or even in a beautiful building such as the temple. The early Christians observed Jewish feasts and holy days as long as they did not conflict with the worship of Christ. Yet, all holy days and feasts and rituals that were inconsistent with their new life in Christ were emphatically denounced. Christians met in the temple and the synagogues until they were accused of being a Jewish cult and were forced out of the temple and synagogues into homes. Expulsion from Judaism was inevitable for the early Christians, but, in the sovereign plan of God, this was a leading

out and liberation so Christians could worship God more gloriously and carry on the work of the ministry more effectively.

Form of Worship. In the New Testament, the church had no fixed form of worship. There was a liturgy but it was not rote repetition. There was an order of worship but it was more casual than what most evangelicals experience today. It was part of the Divine plan that no mention is made of a set order of worship in order that Christians might develop their own forms of worship within their own cultures. There is great freedom in the forms of worship in the New Testament and the general emphasis is upon simplicity. Form of worship differs from Christian to Christian, church to church, denomination to denomination and culture to culture.

Method of Worship. The Bible does not clearly state what went on in a New Testament worship service. We do have some hints, however. The early church practice was to say, “Amen,” in unison at the end of prayers (1 Cor. 14:16). This was obviously a carry-over from the synagogue worship. The early church also had much laity participation.

“What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church” (1 Cor. 14:26).

While the Corinthian Church was abusing the gifts of tongues and prophecy, this verse does give us a hint as to the form of worship for the Corinthian Church. We may argue as to whether this was normative for all the other New Testament churches such as Ephesus and Thessalonica, but it is reasonable to assume other churches had a similar form. Theologians may argue as to whether “revelation” and “a tongue” are active spiritual gifts in the church today and miss the point of this passage. The point to be made is that the Corinthian Church was a *participating* church. The people were deeply engaged in active, participatory worship. They were not spectators. It is true that in the Corinthian Church this form of worship got out of control and the Apostle Paul had to write First Corinthians 12-14 to correct these abuses. He did instruct them to bring order and dignity to their worship services, but he never said stop participating. The early church also had men (males) lift their hands when praying in the public assembly of the church (1 Tim. 2:8). Some have said they think the early Christians clapped their hands in joy out of appreciation for God (Psa. 47:1).

EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPATION FROM HISTORY

Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.). Martyr was a neo-Platonian philosopher who was led to Christ by an insignificant Christian old man while walking on the beach. Philosophy had left Justin empty and he turned to Christ and at once had a love for the Scriptures. Martyr did leave a description in his First Apology about early church worship.

“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 (the gospels) or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgiving, 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.”

Tertullian (160-225 A.D.). He was an immoral lawyer who came to Christ. He was a radical and for a time was involved in the Montanist cult but later came back into fellowship with the established, institutionalized church. He also gave us a hint about worship,

“In our Christian meetings we have plenty of songs, verses, sentences and proverbs. After hand-washing and bringing in the lights, each Christian is asked to stand forth and sing, as best he can, a hymn to God, either of his own composing or one from the Holy Scriptures.”