

Worship According to the Word

A Brief Sketch of Worship that is Biblical and Catholic

As Christians we know that we ought to worship God. The worship service is the main weekly activity of every church. Week after week Christians attend such services. But if we are honest, we will admit that we seldom consider why we worship the way we do. There is little instruction about worship among Bible-believing Christians. And there is little serious theological reflection on the topic by pastors and seminary professors. As a result, most Christians evaluate worship services by how they are affected emotionally by them. The tunes of the hymns, the inflections of voice and phrases of the pastor's prayers, and the rhetoric of the sermon (as opposed to its content) often determine whether a service is judged to be uplifting and spiritual. What "feels" right becomes the standard of evaluation in the absence of any firm doctrinal convictions.

What feels right may be either "traditional" or "modern" depending on whether our past church experience has been positive or negative. If we grew up in a traditional church, and were spiritually nourished there, its forms of worship will feel right. If, however, our church experience was shallow and we were converted to a sincere faith in Christ later in life, then those traditional forms may seem shallow and empty. On the other hand, if we grew up in a sparse fundamentalist style, or an emotional Pentecostal style of worship, and later came to question those theological traditions, then older liturgical forms of worship may "feel" right.

It is not surprising that most Christians approach worship from an emotional perspective. This is very much in tune with the subjectivism of our man-centered culture. We evaluate popular music by how it makes us feel. We judge TV shows by how they affect us emotionally. There is nothing surprising about the same emphasis in worship. But as understandable as this may be, it is none the less deplorable. Indeed, it represents an essential distortion of worship. From a biblical perspective the goal of worship is not to please ourselves, but to please God. Both in the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament the words translated "worship" have the basic meaning "to serve." They are used not only for worship activities, but also for any service rendered to the will of God. Therefore, the crucial issue is what does God want from us in worship. What is the service he requires of us? In what does he delight?

We may appreciate the thought behind a gift of flowers, but if we are allergic to flowers, well... The gift would be all the more appreciated if it were something we wanted. So too, God may be glad that we intend to worship him, but he hardly delights in that worship if it is offered in opposition to his revealed will in Scripture. In fact, there are pointed examples of God's anger at his people when they dared to offer worship he had not authorized. Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, decided that they could offer incense just like Aaron the High Priest. God took notice of their endeavor, but only to turn them into whole burnt sacrifices when fire came out of the tent of meeting and consumed them (Leviticus 10:1ff). God decides how he is to be worshiped. He is the Lord and we are his servants who are to delight to do his will.

Theologians have termed this biblical truth that God is to be worshiped only as he has appointed, the "regulative principle of worship." We are to worship God not as seems best to us, but as he instructs us in his Word. How worship makes us feel is secondary. We cannot ignore our

emotional responses, but we can hold them in check while we pursue the more fundamental question of how God instructs us to worship him in his Word. Let us remember that no matter how we are pleased, uplifted, and renewed by a certain form of worship, it is all for naught if God is not pleased.

Worship According to God's Will

What is the worship that God has appointed in his Word? How should we worship God? In particular, where in the New Testament are we commanded to gather together for worship? Where did Christ establish the worship assembly of the New Covenant? As we consider these questions we may discover that the worship that feels right to us includes things with which God is not pleased, and excludes things that God requires. So we must be ready to reform our worship by the Word of God.

In the Old Covenant the provisions for God's worship are very specifically set forth. A special day (sabbath) and special annual seasons (feasts) were appointed for God's people to worship him (Leviticus 23). The forms of sacrifice and offering are given in considerable detail (Leviticus 1-10). Furthermore, Israel was warned not to worship God with the practices of the nations around them. Rather they were to worship the Lord at the time and place he appointed, and in the manner he commanded.

You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things. But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. (Deuteronomy 12:2-7)

and

Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD. (Exodus 23:17)

The Lord's Supper

God clearly instructed his people through Moses how they were to worship him. We, however, no longer live in the age of the Old Covenant. Where then are the instructions for worship in the New Covenant? In what way did Christ establish the pattern of worship of his Church as the Israel of God, the true priesthood and temple?

Let us begin with the historical record of our Lord's ministry. During his earthly ministry Jesus and his disciples attended synagogue on the sabbath. He also went to the temple at the appointed

times. Indeed, he even cleansed it with great vigor. So we see our Lord keeping the provisions of Old Covenant worship even as he announced a new order.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:21-24)

The apostles after the resurrection continued to frequent the synagogue and the temple. All the early Christians were also Jews. It took some time for the new Christian community to fully grasp the transformation that Christ had accomplished by his death and resurrection. They struggled with whether they should preach to the Gentiles. They debated whether Gentile converts had to be circumcised and become Jews. Nonetheless, from the beginning the Christian community was compelled to hold special Christian gatherings that were apart from the worship of the temple and the synagogue. Though the early Jewish Christians attended the public worship of the Old Covenant, they also held special Christian-only gatherings. Luke in his Acts of the Apostles mentions one of these:

Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. (Acts 20:7)

Luke tells us that these Christians gathered together on the first day of the week rather than on the Old Covenant sabbath. In every mention of worship days in the literature of the ancient Church, Christians came together on the first day of the week, the day of Christ's resurrection (Sunday), not the day of the Old Covenant sabbath (Saturday). Further, Luke tells us that they came together "to break bread." Paul also mentions that the Corinthians came together to eat (1 Corinthians 11:33). They did so on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2) taking up a collection for the poor in Jerusalem at the same time.

This passages reveal to us how Christ established the worship of the New Covenant Church. Jesus never said, hold a "worship service." Rather "the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread ..." Our Lord's institution of his supper (at the last supper) is the institution of the New Covenant worship assembly. From the beginning the Christian community met apart from the synagogue and temple services to do this one thing Jesus commanded: "Do this in remembrance of me." They had to meet as a distinctly Christian assembly, and not merely as a part of Old Covenant Israel. They could pray at the temple, they could teach in the temple courts (where Rabbis frequently held classes). But they also had to gather by themselves (initially in private homes) to do the Lord's supper.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers... So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart... (Acts 2:42, 46)

To our modern way of thinking there may seem to be little connection between eating and worshipping. We naturally understand "breaking bread from house to house" as a reference to

ordinary meals, not worship services. After all, for most of us the Lord's supper is an occasional ritual tacked on at the end of an otherwise complete worship service. This, however, is a long way from the pattern of the Old Covenant out of which the New Covenant emerges as its fulfillment and reality.

In the Old Covenant all worship was a holy meal. The sacrifices offered at the altar were called "food" and "bread" for God (Leviticus 3:11; 21:6, etc.). The altar itself was called "the table of the Lord" (Malachi 1:7, 12). When the people came to worship God, their worship was an offering of various foods to God: slaughtered animals, grains, and wine. And they too were commanded to eat.

There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. (Deuteronomy 12:6-7)

In the Old Covenant public worship was always a meal, food offered to God, and a feast in the presence of God. With this background in mind we can see that in instituting the supper, our Lord was establishing both the worship assembly of the New Covenant, and its essential activity. Just as in the Old Covenant God's people gathered in his presence to offer sacrifice and to eat before the Lord, so now in the New Covenant God's people gather in Christ's presence to offer thanks for the once for all sacrifice of Christ, and to eat with and of the Lord. The Lord's supper is not an occasional element in the Church's worship. It is the source and center of Christian worship.

For this reason, when the Apostolic Church gathered together, they did so "to break bread" or "to eat" (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:33). When we read Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11, we see that for him, "to come together as a church" and "to come together to eat" are synonymous.

For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. (1 Corinthians 11:18)

Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. (1 Corinthians 11:20-21)

Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. (1 Corinthians 11:33)

If we truly believe that God is to be worshiped, not as we please, but as he commands (the regulative principle), then we will do what Jesus told us. When we come together, we will take bread and give thanks... This is not ritualism. It is not Romanism. It is New Testament worship. For when the supper is at the center of our assembly, the gospel is at the center.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

And we may say in passing, that if the Roman Catholic Church can hold mass each Lord's Day, and yet be so far from a clear proclamation of the gospel to its own people, then it is not the Lord's supper that they eat. It is rather a severe distortion of Christ's institution. This is, by the way, the viewpoint of the Protestant reformers, namely, that the mass was a serious distortion of the essence of the holy supper.

The Lord's supper is not an addendum to the gospel. Rather the Lord's supper is nothing less than the gospel itself. In the first place, the supper is the covenant memorial ("do this in remembrance of me") of the saving act of God in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The supper celebrates and proclaims the only one through whom men can be saved. And the supper is the Church's proper response to God who has given his Son for us. In the supper we give thanks for Jesus Christ. But as is true of all of God's dealings with us, just when we lose ourselves in his service offering thanks to him for his gift, we find that it is God who is still doing the giving. For the Lord's supper is also Christ sharing himself with us. It is a communion or participation in his body and his blood. Since we are partakers of Christ in the supper (if we believe), then we are members of his one body, the Church.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

And so by sharing in Christ we become his Church, his body. It is in the actions of the supper that the Church becomes the Church, the redeemed of the Lord. And so the Lord's supper is not merely an activity of worship, nor an element in the worship service. It is the worship. It is what the Church does when she gathers in her Lord's presence. To worship God according to his will is to gather around the table of the Lord in order to do what our Lord appointed for us.

The Lord's Prayer

Since New Testament worship is the gathering of Christ's people in his presence to do his supper, it would seem essential, therefore, that we would speak to God. That is to say, that we would pray. Indeed we cannot do the Lord's supper without prayer, for Jesus himself prayed over the bread and the cup. Likewise the Israelites came to the temple with their sacrifice to pray. Inside the temple was an altar of incense that represented the prayers of God's people coming before his throne. Many of the psalms of David were prayers used in connection with temple worship (1 Chronicles 15:7, Psalm 51, Psalm 116). So too when the New Testament Church gathers, a Church which is the temple of God on earth (1 Corinthians 3:16f, Ephesians 2:20f) and which through the body of Christ enters into the heavenly temple where God sits on his throne (Hebrews 10:19ff), we gather to offer up our prayers to the Lord. Our Lord himself defines our gathering in his presence as a gathering to pray.

Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:19-20)

Likewise, Luke notes the Church was devoted, not only to the breaking of bread, but also to prayers (Acts 2:42). Paul instructs Timothy that:

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior... I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; (1 Timothy 2:1-3, 8)

Prayers also played an important role in the Christian assembly at Corinth when they gathered together to eat the supper. Paul gives instructions for how women are to pray (1 Corinthians 11:13) and he insists that all vocal prayer be in a known language (1 Corinthians 14:13-19). This raises the practical question "what should we pray?" Prayer is not something we do naturally. Indeed, apart from grace, we refuse to pray as we ought. Even Christians are prone to pray amiss (James 4:3-4). How, then, do we learn to pray in an acceptable manner?

The disciples asked Jesus how to pray. His instruction was what we call the Lord's prayer. Like the Lord's supper it is our Lord's institution for us. We are not free to omit the Lord's prayer from our use any more than we are free to omit the Lord's supper.

Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples." So He said to them, "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." (Luke 11:1-2)

The Lord's prayer is the central and most essential prayer of Christian worship. It is both a prayer for us to pray, and a model of prayer to teach us how to pray. But it teaches us how to pray, not by listing for us principles of prayer, or by being an outline of topics, but by being the chief prayer of our Christian lives whose echoes are to be heard in all our prayers.

The Lord's prayer teaches us that the prayers of Christians are in the first place, not a cacophony of individual requests, but the common prayer of the Church that with one voice calls on God our Father. And so Jesus said, "When you pray (plural), say (plural), 'Our Father...'" Christ himself commands us to pray this prayer together in unison. We are not at liberty to exclude this corporate spoken prayer from the worship of God. Rather the Lord's prayer is by Jesus' command a vocal, unison prayer. From this we learn that worship is not private devotions done in a room with other people, but the common service of God's people as a people, a holy priesthood, the body of Christ (1 Peter 2:9f).

The Lord's prayer focuses us on our role as God's servants. The first petitions of the prayer are about God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will. Likewise, the meaning of our lives is found in losing our lives in service to Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). It is the God-centeredness of the Lord's

prayer that is often so lacking in our extemporaneous prayers. But this focus does not exclude our needs, as the later petitions of the Lord's prayer show us. Yet even here the Lord's prayer teaches us to pray for the common needs of the body of Christ - the forgiveness of our sins, our daily bread, our deliverance from evil. Too often the prayers of Christians in worship are rendered trite and trivial by a focus on a multitude of individual requests. Praying the Lord's prayer as the chief and central prayer of worship keeps the biblical emphasis. We should view our other prayers as harmonies on the melody of the Lord's prayer.

In a similar way, all the praises and thanksgivings of the people of God are echoes of the end of the Lord's prayer: "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." The Lord's prayer teaches us to include our thanksgiving and praises, said or sung, with our prayers. We are exhorted in many places in the New Testament to give thanks and praise to God, to sing to him and glorify his name.

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Colossians 3:15)

and

...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... (Ephesians 5:19-20)

The Lord's prayer is the first and chief prayer of the Church. But it is not the only prayer, nor the only praise that God has provided for us. Rather we are exhorted to draw upon the riches of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" which are found throughout the scriptures. There is, in the first place, the book of Psalms. But to these psalms, hymns and spiritual songs we can add the songs found elsewhere in the scriptures from the song of Moses in Exodus 15 to the song of the Lamb in Revelation 15. And it is likely that Paul also had in mind songs, hymns and psalms not in the scripture. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 Paul says that "whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation." This reference seems to be to a new composition even as the teaching, the tongue, or the revelation were not mere recitations of existing texts.

God has not forbidden the use of prayers of our own composition whether they are confessions, intercessions, or praises. But Christ has commanded the use of the Lord's prayer. In a similar way, God has not forbidden the composition of songs after the pattern of the biblical psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, but he has commanded the use of those biblical texts. Much Christian worship is defective since it neglects these divinely inspired prayers, praises, and confessions. That we prefer church hymns to the exclusion of these inspired songs shows the extent to which worship is focused on what pleases us, rather than what pleases God.

So then, when we Christians gather together, we are to do so around the Lord's Table, with the praying of the Lord's prayer, as well as our other prayers and praises, said and sung. In contemporary worship singing by the congregation often functions only to provide a transition between the sermon and prayer. Thus there is little connection between the hymns and the rest of the service. But in the scripture the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are parts of the prayers of the people, or of the instruction of the congregation (Colossians 3:15). They are addresses to God and exhortations to one another (Ephesians 5:18-19). Thus we find in the scripture songs which are said rather than sung (Exodus 15:1, Revelation 5:9, 15:3).

Modern music usually requires that the words be in meter and rhyme. Even in music with an irregular meter, there is a meter such that the words have to be fitted to the music. Ancient music, a form of chanting, needed neither meter nor rhyme. Any text could be sung without altering the text. The result was that a psalm, for example, Psalm 51, could be said or sung. But whether said or sung, it was a prayer of confession. Indeed all the Psalms of David are classified as prayers (Psalm 72:20). We err if we view singing as an essential element in worship. Prayer is an essential element. Singing does not add or take away from the content of the prayer or praise, it rather "glorifies" it. Nothing mars the quality of contemporary worship more than singing for singing's sake. It is amazing the trivial dribble that Christians will sing if they like the tune. But if the text is not an adequate expression of our prayer or praise to God, or of our confession before him, it is not worth singing no matter how beautiful the tune. The only basis for including a particular hymn in worship is that it expressed the appropriate prayer or speech of God's people.

Sometimes it is said that the New Testament prescribes no fixed forms for public worship. Certainly the New Testament contains nothing like the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. But Jesus has prescribed the supper and the Lord's prayer. The New Testament commands the use of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, which are provided in great abundance in the scriptures. While it is true that the Bible does not give us "a full liturgy", it does establish a liturgical core. The essential form for the Church's gathering is the Lord's supper, and the central prayer is the Lord's prayer. And to this prayer we have added all the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs found in scripture.

The Reading and Preaching of the Word

Our Lord not only commanded the supper and gave us his prayer, but he appointed and equipped men to be his servants to declare his Word to us (Matthew 28:18ff). When the Church gathers around the Lord's table, we come to hear and believe the good news of Jesus. Indeed, it is the gospel that calls the assembly into being. Therefore, preaching is not something added to the supper as a little extra. It is the indispensable pre-condition for the supper. Preaching is a verbal proclamation of the same truth that is proclaimed by the actions of the supper.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

According to Paul, the eating the drinking of the supper is a preaching of the gospel. Likewise Paul says of his preaching to the Corinthian Christians,

For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

The gathering of the Church around the Lord's table requires the preaching of the Word of Christ. We have no one less than Jesus himself as the example. For when our Lord appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, he not only ate with them, but he taught them (Luke 24:43-48). So too Paul as he went about visiting the Churches preached to them (Luke 14:21-22). And he commanded that his written instructions be read as well (Colossians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:27). In 1 Corinthians 14:26 the Apostle expects that the leaders of the Corinthian congregation will edify the saints by teaching and revelation.

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

Likewise, Paul instructs Timothy to follow the same pattern of preaching.

Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. (1 Timothy 4:13)

and

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (2 Timothy 4:1-4)

Preaching the Word is indispensable. The New Testament in many places refers to the Word of Christ or the Word of God. (For example: Romans 10:17, 1 Corinthians 15:2, Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 1:13, 1 Thessalonians 1:8, 2:13) This Word is the message from Jesus and about Jesus. It is the declaration of his coming in human flesh, his sufferings for us, his resurrection on the third day, and his ascension to the right hand of God the Father. This Word was entrusted to the Apostles, and they have preserved it for us in their writings, the scriptures of the New Testament. It is also the key to understanding the scriptures of the Old Testament. The Word of Christ is the true interpretation of the Old Testament as fulfilled in Christ. It is, therefore, the preaching of the Scriptures. But it is more than a historical commentary on an ancient text. It is rather the glad announcement that all God had promised in the past, he has now accomplished in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. In other words, it is the Gospel.

Because the Word of Christ has been written for us in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the form of preaching the Word in the assembly is necessarily the exposition and explanation of the Scriptures. Only by tying preaching directly to the scriptures can we be assured that it is the Word of Christ, and not merely the human opinions of the minister that we hear in the Church's assembly.

It is the Word of Christ that called the church into existence, and that nourishes the Church in her continuing life in this world (Romans 10:17, Ephesians 5:26). Whenever the Church gathers, she gathers to hear the Word of her Lord, that is, to listen to the voice of him who is present in our midst. It is from that Word that our faith is strengthened and our repentance renewed. And so the center of Christian worship is not the works of men, but the works of Christ announced to us in his Word. There can be no true worship where the Word of Christ is neglected for there can be no true Church of Christ without the Word of Christ. True worship is rooted in the faithful preaching and hearing of the Word of Christ. Without the preaching of the Word both the supper and the prayers soon degenerate into ritualism devoid of faith. But neither the refusal to do the supper weekly, nor to say the Lord's prayer guarantees that worship will be from the heart. Liturgy, whether divinely inspired (Lord's prayer), or humanly composed, does not lead to ritualism. Only the preaching of the Word renews the heart, and only its neglect leads to dead formalism. Forms in worship are both inescapable and commanded by Christ himself. But it is devotion to the preaching of the Word that alone breathes life into the congregation.

So then, we have contended that the essential form and content of Christian worship is commanded by our Lord. The Lord's supper is the essential form of the Church's worship. The Lord's prayer is the essential prayer, a corporate spoken prayer, to which we have added the inspired psalms, hymns and spiritual songs of the scriptures. To these we are free to add our own prayers, and our own hymns in imitation of the divine examples. Finally, we have insisted that the preaching of the Gospel as the exposition of the scripture as fulfilled in Christ is the necessary condition for all true worship. There is no worship without the preaching of the Word by those set apart as ministers of that Word.

The Care of the Poor

This pattern of preaching, prayer and the Lord's supper was present from the beginning of the Church. Luke writes of the early Church in Jerusalem that

... they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

In this passage we find one more element we have not mentioned. This is "fellowship." Fellowship in this passage, however, is not what we usually mean by the term. For modern Christians fellowship means talking together, sharing our concerns, and befriending one another. As important as that may be, it is not what Luke has in mind. The word translated "fellowship" means participation or sharing. In this passage it means that the Christians shared their wealth with the poor among them. This should remind us of the Corinthian passage where Paul exhorts the believers to store up money each Lord's day for the relief of the poor in Christ in Jerusalem.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. (1 Corinthians 16:1-3)

If we have listened to the Word of salvation, and eaten of the Savior in the Holy supper, the effect of being so loved by God is that we will in turn love our brothers who are in need. So from the beginning of the Church, the assembly of the saints has included a collection for the poor of Christ's Church. Certainly there must also be provision for those who labor in the ministry of the Word (1 Corinthians 9:8ff, 1 Timothy 5:17f). But the focus is on sharing with those in need in the body of Christ.

The Pattern of New Covenant Worship

From our study we can see that the core of the New Covenant Worship according to the New Testament is:

The reading and preaching of the Word

The Lord's supper

The Lord's prayer together with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs

Collection for the poor of Christ's Church

Now it is often said that there is no description of an entire worship service in the New Testament. This is true in a sense. The Book of Acts, for example, never gives us a full description of a Church assembly like we find in the early second century in the writings of Justin Martyr. But there is a rather full picture of worship at Corinth in 1 Corinthians. In that letter we have already noted that worship was an assembly to eat the Lord's supper (11:20-21, 33). The assembly also involved the offering of prayers, psalms, teaching and revelation (14:26) as well as the collection for the poor (16:1ff). (The revelatory gifts of tongues and prophecy did not cease until the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. See Daniel 9:24.)

But we have an even more important example of New Covenant worship, namely, the resurrection appearances of Jesus. Here for the first time the disciples worshiped the risen Christ (Matthew 28:17, Luke 24:42). In Christ's appearances to his disciples he conducts the assembly of believers. He greets them with a word of peace (Luke 24:36, John 20:19, 26), he reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30f, 35, John 21:13), he instructs them in the true meaning of the scriptures as fulfilled in himself (Luke 24:27, 44ff), and he dismisses them with a word of peace (Luke 24:50). These narratives are especially important in instructing those who are ministers in how to conduct the assembly of the Church. For the ministers of the New Covenant are only servants through whom Christ speaks to his people. Their work is his work. He blessed so they bless. He broke bread so they break bread. He taught the scriptures so they teach the same. Who better to use as the example of how to lead the assembly than the Lord himself?

Finally, we note that the resurrection appearances of Jesus occurred on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. The narrative takes pains to point this out (Mark 16:9, Luke 24:13, John 20:19). Thus it was Jesus himself who established the pattern of the New Covenant assembly meeting on the Lord's Day, with the breaking of bread, and the exposition of the scriptures. Who are we to do it any differently?

What then is the worship in the New Covenant? It is the assembling of the saints in the presence of the Lord, on the Lord's Day, to hear the Word of the Lord, to pray the Prayer of the Lord, with biblical psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and to do the supper of the Lord. To these we may add our own prayers and songs. It is also the work of the ministers of Christ to greet the gathering with the peace of Christ, to announce the forgiveness of sins to all who believe (John 20:23), and to dismiss them with the blessing of Christ. And that our worship may not be a hollow performance, let us remember to share with those in need, even as Christ became poor for our sakes, that we might be rich in him (2 Corinthians 8:9).

If we were to construct a service of worship from the material we have studied above, what would it look like? There is, obviously, a lot of flexibility. As we have said, the New Testament gives us a liturgical core, but not a complete liturgy in the usual sense of the word. But here is a reasonable order including all that is commanded and modeled for us by Christ, and his apostles.

Greeting and word of peace

Confession of sins and assurance of forgiveness

Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs

Scripture readings

Sermon

Collection for the poor

Lord's prayer and other prayers

Lord's supper

Dismissal and word of peace

If this outline seems very traditional, it is because the worship of the Church grew out of the same apostolic instruction that we have just surveyed. The earliest examples of Christian worship services confirm this. Justin Martyr, for example, gives us this description of worship as he experienced it in the early second century.

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 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 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 succors the orphans and widows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning with 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 darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. (First Apology, Chapter LXVII)

We also have another interesting witness to the worship of the ancient Church in a document called the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. This document gives us the sample wording of prayers at the supper, and exhorts its reader to use of the Lord's prayer (sections 8, 9). Again we see that the meeting of Christians on the Lord's Day was a meeting to do the Lord's supper.

On the Lord's own day gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. (section 14)

We also note here the concern for confession of sins as a preparation for participation in the supper. Our sacrifice of praise, which is the Lord's supper, can only be done with a true heart. As John teaches us, if we say we have no sin God's truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins to our Father he will forgive and cleanse us (1 John 1:9-10).

These two documents we have quoted do not form a rule for our worship. They do, however, confirm that our interpretation of what the New Testament requires as worship is essentially the same understanding as the early Church. This cannot be said of most American evangelical churches. Most evangelical churches do the Lord's supper only occasionally. The Lord's prayer is seldom used. The biblical psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are present only as a verse or two at a time in so-called "scripture songs." We need desperately to reform our worship by the Word of God. We need to return to Christ's instructions, to the examples of the New Testament, and to their faithful echoes in the worship of the Ancient Church.

What is worship according to the Word of God? Worship is the gathering of God's people in the presence of the Lord, on the Day of the Lord, around the Table of the Lord, to hear the Word of the Lord, to do the supper of the Lord, to pray the Lord's prayer, to sing the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and to share with the poor of Christ. This is the worship that is acceptable to the Lord. And this is the worship that will nurture and nourish our faith through all the troubles of this life to eternal life.

Dr. Jack Kinneer