

THE SEARCH FOR GENUINE CHRISTIANITY - #5

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In our last article, we were pursuing the search for what is essential to genuine Christianity by considering various innovations to the original. The five areas of discussion included: [1] party names; [2] creeds and traditions; [3] additions to the simple biblical message of salvation; [4] extraneous aspects of worship and [5] changes in church organization. Having addressed the first three of these, in this article we will consider a few random thoughts concerning the worship assembly. We will leave the fifth item for discussion to next month.

Extraneous Aspects of Worship

While our discussion of worship will be limited to the assembly, we find little difference in principles of worship for public or private occasions. Our objective in worship is to honor God. Our English term roots itself in an older form that is close to “worth-ship” meaning to ascribe worth. Three Greek terms are found in our New Testaments that are variously rendered “worship” in translation. *Proskuneo* means “to kiss (the hand or the ground) toward” and is found repeatedly in the discussion of worship in John 4:20-24. It carries the idea of giving adoration to someone of stature. *Latreuo* appears twenty-one times in the NT and is sometimes translated “service.” It generally refers more to the actions or duties that one does as worship to God. *Sebomai* expresses the idea of honoring deity by doing His will. Yet, defining “worship” may be as difficult as defining “love.” We may have a good idea as to its meaning, but to express that precisely is almost impossible. Thus, we might say that worship is simply a “responding to God.” This response grows out of two realizations: The recognition of who God is; and the realization of what God has done. The apostle Paul speaks of “objects” of worship (Acts 17:23; 2 Thess. 2:4) and most of us recognize that the One, True God is the object of our worship and that our purpose in coming together is to honor and praise Him.

God is glorified and honored by our worship. He desires it and requires it. Yet, He can also be offended by it (see, for example Isaiah 1:11-15 and Malachi 1:6-14). This concept that God can somehow become enraged at our attempts to worship is rather foreign to the modern mind. Most believe that if we call something “worship” or “religious” then God is automatically pleased with it. So people label all sorts of things “worship” or “spiritual” which, in reality, are not. Likely, many have lost sight of who God is and no longer treat Him with reverence and awe. There is the tendency for us to cut God down to manageable size until we now think we control Him. Ultimately, we have become pleased with ourselves when we ought to be trembling with fear.

Worship involves what we might call “form” and “feeling.” Form is the action or activity of worship while feeling is the attitude by which we present our offering. Our attitudes or feelings toward God are often revealed by the form or action of our worship. The priests in Malachi’s day who brought lame and blind sacrifices to God were revealing something about their attitudes toward Him. Even God suggested they would not try to offer these gifts to their governor because they were too inferior (Mal. 1:8). God rejected their offerings because they “despised” His name (vs. 6).

One may have the right form but the wrong feeling or attitude in worship. Jesus refers to such people as “hypocrites” when He quoted Isaiah 29:13, “These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (Mk. 7:6). It is also possible to have the right attitude, but the wrong form, as is apparently the case with Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1,2).

All of Scripture points us to this truth: God does not accept everything we might call worship and that acceptable worship depends upon our having the right attitude and the right action.

Since God puts our worship to the test and pronounces it “acceptable” or “unacceptable,” then surely we can test our worship before we offer it and determine whether it will be pleasing to Him. Two

questions may be raised concerning our worship to help us.

First, we may probe our attitudes to see if they are right by asking the question, "Why am I doing this?" In other words, why do I bow my head in prayer? Is it just a ritual we go through and I allow my mind to wander to worldly matters? Why am I singing this song? Do I understand the words... am I offering this from my heart as praise to God? If our hearts and minds are not involved in the activities of worship, we might as well have a tape recorder playing songs in an empty church building.

Second, we may discover whether we are participating in the right actions of worship by testing them with the question: "Do I have authority to worship God in this manner?" Since God requires worship and does not accept everything we might offer to Him, we should seek to know God's will for us in bringing our offerings to Him. If someone says, "I think we ought to use a piano with our singing," then we should ask, "Do we have authority from God to do that?"

It is obvious, by simply observing the various denominational approaches to the worship assembly, that many innovations have been incorporated into modern worship. If a religious group was sincere in searching for genuine Christianity, then it would need to eliminate the human changes that have been adopted. Certainly, there are essential aspects of worship that may be discovered in the New Testament writings. To go beyond these would be to move without divine authority.

The chart on the next page shows some of the "assembly activities" in which the New Testament Christians engaged. Obviously, not all of their assemblies were for the specific purpose of praising God. But in regard to worship, the first six items can certainly be established as common practices in the early church. What more should or could be done when we come together? And, would we have authority for doing more or less than what the early Christians did?

A brief study of the condemnation of the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 reveals their wrong use of the assembly. Their participation in the Lord's Supper had become a divisive meal. They had lost focus as to why they came together and were distracted into sinful activities in the worship assembly. Paul's condemnation is clear: "*Therefore when you come together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first...*" (vs. 20,21). What the Corinthian Christians were doing could not be called "*the Lord's Supper*" because it served humans rather than honored the Lord. Some had turned the sacred memorial into a self-serving activity. Their purpose in coming together was to bring offerings to God (Heb. 13:15: 1 Pet. 2:5), but instead they were serving themselves with no thought of God or the church of God (vs. 22). Paul brought them back to the simple memorial, reminding them of its meaning (vs. 23-26). He also told them to remove the extraneous and distracting meal that had been incorporated into their assembly (vs. 27,34).

The Corinthians represent the tendency many have toward entertainment of self in worship. They were doing what pleased themselves. Paul shows the difference between their actions and what Jesus required. The changes brought into the Corinthian assembly actually altered the Lord's purpose in the Supper.

Numerous innovations of the modern age may also move us to "despising" God (Mal. 1:6) in order to please ourselves. For example, the motivation for the so-called "praise teams" and the introduction of instruments into our singing seems to be self-serving. Many of us are distracted away from our purpose in singing by giving way to the desire for personal enjoyment. The soothing sounds of the instrument and the perfect tones of expert singers move us beyond what God desires in our praise of Him. These innovations, when honestly appraised, are implemented to benefit our ears rather than God's. Like the Corinthians of old, we may be striving more for what satisfies us rather than what honors God.

Our Creator is after our hearts and minds in worship. Paul also made this clear to the Corinthians when he condemned their misuse of spiritual gifts in the assembly in chapter 14. Those with "tongues" (the ability to speak a foreign language) were flaunting their gifts by speaking when no one present could understand the language. The apostle reminds them that speaking in the assembly was for the purpose of edifying the church. Thus, if one could not interpret the language being spoken, then it is an exercise in futility because the speaker is only "*speaking into the air*" (vs. 9). In such cases where there is no one to interpret the language, Paul shows that "*...if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also*" (vs. 14,15). What is important in the worship assembly is that we engage our minds and hearts in the prescribed activities of praising God. It is the heart that God hears and not the sound. The mindless rituals of traditionalism do not achieve what God is after, nor do the modern changes which appeal to the flesh rather than the spirit. Both "traditions" and "innovations" have been added to God's original painting of Christianity, and must be removed for us to find the genuine work of art.

In the search for genuine Christianity, we should recognize that worship is God ordained and must be God approved. Since there is no other way of establishing God's will in the matter of worship than through the New Testament, we must not go beyond what is written. (1 Cor. 4:6). To simply *desire* something other than what is found in Scripture is insufficient reason to bring it into the worship activity. And, there is no end to what people would *desire* to bring in. If one may introduce a piano into our congregational singing, then others could demand a full orchestra. And, if these are allowed to have what they desire, then who is to refuse those who can make instrumental sounds with their voices? I know of men who can play tunes on their armpits... would these be excluded? With Malachi, we might ask, "Would we offer such to our country's president for the purpose of honoring him?"

The simplicity of worship, in the few glimpses we have of the first Christians, is noticeable. *"And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer"* (Acts 2:42). The genuine heart reads Luke's description with a longing to return to such spiritual uplifting. *"And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight"* (Acts 20:7). Here are people who wanted to be spiritually fed, and apparently, had no thought as to "time" in worship. The genuine Christian does not come to the assembly to be entertained, but to honor God and receive spiritual edification from His word.

In our next article, we will say a few words about the way in which Christians organize themselves as God's people for the purpose of accomplishing God's work.

Assembly Activity	Scripture Reference
1. Lord's Supper	Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20,33
2. Praying	Acts 2:42; 4:24,31; 1 Cor. 14:15-19
3. Singing	1 Cor. 14:15,26; Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19
4. Preaching, Teaching, Exhorting	1 Cor. 14:23-29; Acts 11:26; 20:7
5. Reading Scripture	1 Tim. 4:13; 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16
6. Giving	1 Cor. 16:1-3; Acts 2:44f.
7. Baptizing	Acts 2:41
8. Confessing sin	1 Jn. 1:6-9; James 5:16
9. Administering discipline	1 Cor. 5:4f.; Matt. 18:17f.
10. Appointing elders & workers	Acts 6:5f.; 13:2f.
11. Discussion & problem solving	Acts 15:4,6,12,22