



WORSHIP OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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Welcome and thanks for joining me for Let the Bible Speak... a weekly bible study program and we're glad you're a part of it today. We're involved in a series of lessons about the church revealed in the New Testament and today we come to the fifth lesson in that series where we consider the worship of that church. One of the more obvious features of the church was the fact that they often came together to engage in spiritual activity...to participate in the service of God together as a body. What were those assemblies for and what did they consist of?

For a beginning scripture reading, I would like to return to Acts the second chapter, which records the establishment of the church in the city of Jerusalem. That is where it all began on earth after the ascension and enthronement of Christ in heaven. We have already learned how the apostles immediately began making disciples of the Christ through the preaching of the gospel. As men and women heard, believed, and obeyed the gospel, the Lord added them to the church. (Acts 2, verses 41 and 47). These new believers were soon organized into local congregations that constituted and functioned as the body of Christ from place to place. In the days and weeks that followed, verse 42 says: ***"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."***

Notice that the church 'continued steadfastly' in these things. In the ten times the word this translates is used in the New Testament, it means to keep on or to continually do a thing. It means to devote oneself to a thing or practice. The "breaking of bread" sometimes refers to eating a regular meal but it is also used in the New Testament to refer to the eating of the Lord's Supper. In this case, it refers to the Lord's Supper as it wouldn't have any meaning for Luke to say they continued eating common meals because everyone does that, (saints, and sinners alike) or else we would physically perish. He is referring to the disciples coming together continually or regularly to observe the Lord's Supper. So, assembling for these things was a marked feature of the church from its very beginning. What does the bible tell us about these assemblies?

It is beyond dispute that congregations of the church spoken of in the New Testament, came together on a regular basis. While their gatherings were only one part of their activity as disciples, these gatherings were a sacred and vital function of each congregation. In admonishing Christians who were tempted to turn away from Christ, the writer of Hebrews warned them by saying “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

First, we see that the church was in the habit of assembling. Second, he says that some were making a habit of failing to be part of that assembly. Third, he says that it was not only wrong to do so but that they needed to assemble with their fellow-members to exhort one another to faithfulness. Christians who desire to be faithful to Christ must do the same today.

What was the purpose of their assemblies? Why did Christ institute the church with such a practice? Why is it necessary? The bible gives us a few different indications. First, according to this passage, they met for EXHORTATION. Christians need one another. Faithful disciples draw strength and encouragement from one another, and you can't do that without being WITH one another. And regardless of some may think, there is no substitute for Christians being in one another's' presence. Technology is amazing and can serve a wonderful and helpful purpose but a Zoom session or an internet/social media connection is not the same thing as actually being together with other believers. We come together to exhort one another. The church also came together to edify one another. 1 Corinthians chapters 11 through 14 deal at length with the gatherings of the church and one of the key emphases of Paul is that when the church came together, those who assembled were to be edified. The word edify means “to build up” and Paul specifies that much of that ‘building up’ came through the teaching that was done in their assemblies.

The church also came together to worship God as a corporate body. Now, there are those who promote the idea that the assemblies of the church were never for the purpose of worship but merely encouragement, but such an idea denies nearly 2,000 years of recorded church history. For one thing, the New Testament text speaks of what the church did when it came together, and such activities were acts usually associated with worship. For example, they came together for the word of God to be read to them and explained to them. They came together to pray. They sang in their assemblies (according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:15). Paul told the Ephesian church in Ephesians 5:19 to “speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs...” The word “hymn” refers to a song of praise.

In Nehemiah the eighth chapter, we read where the people were gathered publicly (as one man, the bible says) to hear Ezra read the word of God and he and other men explain the text to them, the bible says in verse 6 when this took place that the people bowed their heads and worshipped. It's silly to suggest that God's people would come together in the Old or New Testament and learn from and thus be convicted by the word of God, corporately pray to God, sing songs of praise and homage to God, remember the death of the Son of God and at the same time ‘proclaim his death in anticipation of His return’ (1 Corinthians 11:26) and not call that worship.

So, the church came together for exhortation, edification, and glorification, and there's even another thing suggested by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:23-24 and that is that unbelievers may be convinced of the truth by what takes place in the assembly. Though the regular assembly of the church was primarily for the church itself and most evangelization took place out in the community, the fact is, the gatherings of the church did serve as one vehicle through which some were convinced and converted to the truth.

So, these were the divinely authorized purposes of their assemblies. Never once does the bible indicate that the church came together to be entertained. It is hard to imagine the believers of the first century coming together in homes, in secret hideouts, or even in public places to watch a show or a performance. Rather, these humble disciples came together to participate in divinely appointed acts of homage and service directed toward God and one another. Paid performers and stage acts are completely foreign to the church we read of in the New Testament.

Now, the bible indicates that their meetings were frequent and regular. The church was called together on various occasions, but the time the New Testament is specific about is on the first day of the week. As we have seen, Acts 2:42 tells us the disciples constantly or regularly attended to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayers but it isn't until Acts 20:7 that the bible specifies when they did so. Paul spent a week in the city of Troas and delayed his departure until he could assemble with the church there. The record says: "Now on the first day of the week (which refers to Sunday), when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." Notice, they assembled for the purpose of 'breaking bread'.

Was this breaking of bread referring to the Lord's Supper? Yes, because first, we have other references in the New Testament that show us the Lord's church came together for this purpose. For example, Paul acknowledged in 1 Corinthians 11:17-26 that the church at Corinth CAME TOGETHER to eat the Lord's Supper, even though there were abuses and problems surrounding their assemblies that he had to correct. Still yet, they did come together to commune. And five chapters later, in chapter 16:2, Paul indicates that they came together as a church EVERY first day of the week. Thus, we read of the church at Troas here in Acts 20:7 coming together on the first day of the week to break bread.

We might remember that God commanded the Jews under the Mosaic covenant to observe the Sabbath Day. When Moses received that as a commandment on Mount Sinai, God did not specifically state "every Sabbath Day" but that is certainly what they understood the commandment to mean for as long as they were faithful to God, they observed the Sabbath Day of EVERY week! But here is where the early church/post-apostolic writings are helpful in providing us with a historical perspective. These writings indicate that it was the practice of the church for at least the first few centuries to observe the Lord's Supper on the first day of each week. In the writing known as the Didache (dee-dah-kay) or "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" from about 125 AD, one quotation says "*But every Lord's Day do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread and give thanks...*" In about 150 AD, Justin Martyr affirmed that the Lord's Supper was observed each Lord's Day.

So, each congregation of the New Testament church came together on the first day of every week to break bread. What were the other things that took place when the church assembled itself and how did they do them? The New Testament provides us a composite picture of their assemblies. Let's notice those things. First, there was the breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper. Now, you may be accustomed to seeing the Lord's Supper observed in a varying ways today but the question we're concerned with now is how the church in the New Testament observe it? There are only five references in the New Testament that tell us how Jesus instituted the supper and how the church followed His example. They are recorded in Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Friend, all that we can learn about how Jesus instituted and observed the Lord's Supper with the twelve and how the church under their direction observed it can be learned from these five passages. While each account may emphasize some feature or statement that others do not, the

way Jesus instituted it and the elements He used to institute it are clearly and consistently stated between the different accounts. Mark's account is particularly concise, and I want you to listen to it and carefully compare it with how it is often observed today, perhaps even in your own assemblies. Mark 14:22-25 "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, (the word bread is "artos" in the original text which means a loaf of bread and that bread was unleavened for this was during the Jewish Passover when no leaven was to be present), blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." [23] Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." Jesus shared a loaf of bread with the disciples which Paul later said in 1 Corinthians 10:17 represented the "one body" which is broken by all who partake of it. He also shared a cup of fruit of the vine with them from which they all drank as a representation of the New Covenant made of force by His blood. Jesus instructed His disciples when they did these things: "THIS DO in remembrance of me..." In other words, Jesus was setting an example and instructing them on what they were to do going forward. It was only much later that people began to deviate from the example Jesus set.

The disciples also took up a collection for the saints on the first day of the week. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul says: "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 (some translations say "every week") let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. Each Sunday, they were to contribute to a common fund to be used for the relief of needy church members (called saints). This is not a reference to something each family did at home by themselves because if that were the case there would have had to be a gathering of those funds when Paul came. Rather, Paul told them they were to treasure these funds up from Sunday to Sunday so they would be ready and available to meet the church's need. We have no record of the New Testament church raising funds in any other way. Paul instructed them to do so by their offerings on the first day of each week that was to be kept for distribution to the need when the time came.

And then, we see in 1 Corinthians 14 (as well as other passages) that the New Testament church came together to be taught the Word of God. Paul was specific about the way this was to take place. He gave several regulations for how the assembly was to be carried out. Now, at that time, before the apostolic work of revealing the entire body of truth was complete, God's Word was still being given through direct revelations of the Holy Spirit. At Corinth these proceedings were descending into confusion and chaos and so Paul saw the need to remind them of how the assembly was to be conducted in an orderly way and all things done for edification. Now, we're not still receiving revelations in the manner they were, but we have the completed revelation in the New Testament. But just as the apostles' letters were to be read and explained in the church back then, so, their words are to be read and taught to believers today and those assemblies are to be done unto edifying as well. The principles have not changed. Paul in verse 23 shows that the church came together in ONE PLACE for teaching. They didn't divide into groups based upon age or levels of experience but rather in one gathering. This was the way God's word was taught in public, in the Old and New Testaments. There was to only be one speaking at a time, according to verse 31, and the teaching was to be done by the men in the church. Paul plainly said that women were not given this role in public or when the church assembled, according to verses 34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12. Now, someone may say, but Paul was dealing with the chaos at Corinth and his words were not to be universally applied... but look in verse 36: "Or did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached?" In other words, Corinth was subject to the same instructions and regulations as every other church. They were not an exception.

And then, singing was part of their assemblies. Not only did Christ sing with His disciples the night He met with them and instituted the Lord's Supper, but the early church sang together. Again, in regulating their assemblies at Corinth, Paul said "1 Corinthians 14:15 "...I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding." In other words, he would sing from his spirit or from his heart and would understand the words he was singing. Does that not show that singing was part of their gathering? Certain passages in the New Testament, such as 1 Timothy 3:16 are thought by many scholars to have represented a fragment of a hymn sang in the early church. Paul said in Ephesians 5:19 "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Yes, we have several references and even commandments to sing to one another (that would imply a corporate gathering) and to the Lord (that would imply worship) and to practice "teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (Colossians 3:16) but nowhere were they told to play an instrument. In fact, for the first 600 years of recorded church history, there is no mention of instrumental music in church worship. Given the presence of instrumental music among the Jews in the Old Testament era and its mentions in the Psalms, it is more than conspicuous that it is absent from the first 600 years of the church's history.

And finally, we also read of prayers being a central feature of the church's gatherings. Virtually nobody disputes this fact, and we won't take the time to cite the references beyond the ones we have already cited. But it should be apparent why prayer would be a focal feature of the Christians gatherings.

Friend, now the question is, are we to worship like the New Testament church did? Does this even matter? I leave you with three verses to consider. John 4:24 "God is a Spirit and they who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." Colossians 3:17 "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." And then, Paul's admonishment of the erring church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11:2, "I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you." You be the judge. Does it matter considering what Jesus and Paul said? If we wish to be like the church of the New Testament, we should seek to assemble and worship like they did under the auspices of the inspired apostles. Such would certainly be a way that is right and cannot be wrong.

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