

# Worship in the New Testament Church

## Distinctions between the Old and New Testaments

### A. Spiritual state of the Congregates

As we look into the issue of New Testament worship and the elements of style and practice, we are immediately struck by the fact that the congregation which worshipped in the Old Testament was entirely distinct from the New Testament congregation.

Under the Old Covenant, the crucial element was one's relationship to Abraham and subsequently to the twelve tribes related to Jacob's sons. Birth, circumcision - in a word, Jewishness - was the basis for having a part in the Covenant God made with Israel at Sinai and the religious worship which was a part of the Covenant law. Thus although Israelites such as Moses, Joshua, David, and a list of others (as in Hebrews 11) were men of faith, this was not an issue when one partook of appointed times of worship. Because YAHWEH was the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you need only be born of this geneology to have access to all the privileges of the Old Covenant.

All of these Old Testament elements change with the New Covenant as Hebrews 8 delineates. Under the New Covenant, those who partake of the covenant have the following "birthmarks:" "I...put my laws in their mind, and write them on their hearts" (sanctification), "I will be their God" (adoption), "They shall all know Me" (regeneration), "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness" (justification). God is their Father personally, *not nationally*. Under the Old Covenant the issue is birth, whereas under the New Covenant the issue is the new birth.

In short, the congregation mentioned over 300 times in the Old Testament in covenantally linked together by their relationship to Moses and the Siniatic Covenant via Abraham. The assembly of the New Covenant is linked together via Abraham's seed - Jesus Christ (Gal 3:15f) and their union with Him. The sign of this Abrahmic relationship was circumcision (Gen 17:7), while the "sign" of the relationship to Abraham in the New Covenant was/is faith (Gal 3:27-29).

## B. Worship: Emphasis of the Old Testament

It is instructive to observe the activities which were part of Old Testament worship. In the Psalms: "I will worship towards thy holy hill," (5:7); "let us bow down and worship Him," (95:6); "worship at His holy hill," (99:9); "I will worship towards thy holy temple," (138:2). Worship is associated with alters (2 Chron 32:12), God's manifest glory (Ex 33:10), the firstfruits of labor (Deut 26:10), repentance (1 Sam 15:30), purification (2 Sam 12:20), sacrifice (1 Sam 1:3), and praise and music (2 Chron 29:28). The most basic and prevalent idea - indeed the essence of the Hebrew word "worship" - was to "bow down" (cf. 2 Chron 29:29). The key ingredient to all this is *structure*. Worship for these unregenerate congregates was appointed; appointed place, appointed time, appointed sacrifices, and even an appointed choir for praise! If there is a word to describe this, it is **ritual, not Spiritual**.

## C. What of New Testament Worship?

There are few doctrines in the New Testament that give us as much surprise as the doctrine of worship. One might even say we are stunned. Although there are references to worship in the Gospels, the book of Acts and Revelation, the New Testament Epistles - the doctrinal/explanatory part of the New Testament - **is completely silent as to worship**. This is all the more incredible when we consider: First, 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14 is an extensive treatment of church life and interaction with no mention of worship. Second, 1 Timothy was an epistle written to make known "how thou (Timothy) *might behave thyself in the house of God*." Surely one would expect a reference to worship here, yet there is none. Third, our Lord tells the Samaritan woman that "the hour is coming...and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in Spirit and in truth: for the Father seeks such to worship Him" (Jn 4:21-23). With such a definitive statement of future devotion, it is inconceivable that worship would be past over completely in the instructional part of the New Covenant - the Epistles - yet this is exactly what we find.

A quick examination of "worship" in the Gospels and Acts finds worship of individuals to Christ, deceitful or false worship, and, with reference to Acts, worship directed towards Jerusalem. **But there is no direction as to Christian worship.** This leads us to one of two possibilities; either the church was to continue Old Testament worship (or the "synagogue" worship developed in post-exilic Israel, ca. B.C. 200), or we might be looking in the wrong place for our direction regarding New Testament worship.

The difficulties with the first option are that the issues of "place," "time," "sacrifice," and such terminology in the law which formed the essential ingredients of Old Covenant worship ceased to have meaning because God has established a New Covenant. Now, under the New Covenant, a holy place is where two or three are gathered (Mt 18:20); time is always special, such that God calls upon us to redeem it (Eph 5:16; Col 4:5); and our sacrifices are ourselves (Rom 12:1), giving (Phil 4:17), and praise (Heb 13:15).

### Christian Worship

Introduction - Christ and the Church -

The Risen Savior's Order for His Body, Eph 4:10ff

In Ephesians, it is written of Christ and His headship of the church that He "ascended up far above the heavens, that He might fill all things, and He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for (προς) the perfecting (καταρτισμον) of the saints, for (εις) the work of the ministry, for (εις) the edifying of the body of Christ: until we all come in (εις) the unity of the faith" (Eph 4:10-13).

As the Scriptures direct us to Christ as the Head of the church (Col 1:18), as such is also our Shepherd and Overseer (2 Peter 2:25), our teacher (Jn 13:13-14), our Apostle (Heb 3:1), and our Prophet (Acts 3:22). This is reflected in the statement of Christ to the leaders-to-be of the New Testament (e.g. apostles) when He said, "he that is greatest among you shall be your servant," (Matt 23:11). Christ is our Master, and His under-shepherds are servants (just as Christ said He came not to be served, but to serve, Mt 20:28)

We see then why Paul taught us that Christ ascended and gave pastors and teachers to face the congregation (προς) and equip (καταρτισμον) His saints to this end (εις), that **THEY (the saints)**

might do the work of ministry (διακονία) and (εἰς) edify fellow saints unto maturity. The pastors/elders/teachers **EQUIP**; and the saints - thus equipped - **MINISTER to the body**. The greek leads naturally to an illustration such as a community building a house. The carpenters, electricians etc. (i.e leadership) equip and instruct the community (congregation) regarding the elements of constructing a home, and then the community actually goes about the task of building the structure. In the case of the church, *the structure being built by the community of saints is the lives of each and every member, and the goal is the maturity of the body in the faith (that is, in Christ)*. In this way, all saints use their gifts, and all play an essential role in the growth of the body of Christ.

*The above is **foundational** as to why we shall find the kind of activity and body life in places such as Romans 12:3ff and 1 Corinthians 12-14.*

**This is the Christ-given structure for the New Testament Church!**

A. The Church, Worship, and Congregationalism

We must face the fact that the emphasis of God's presence at the finishing of the tabernacle (Ex 40), and His presence at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron 7) prepares us for God's descent at Pentecost. The great difference, of course, is God's presence is IN His people. Each saint is a holy temple (1 Cor 6:19), but much more important, is the dwelling of God in the midst of His saints.

The church is God's temple where the Spirit dwells (1 Cor 3:16f, which is why a teacher can *defile* God's temple through false teaching). Ephesians 2:20-22 states "(the household of God) is built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together growth unto a *holy temple of the Lord*: In whom ye also are builded together for *an habitation of God through the Spirit*," This confirms are Lord's words, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20), and the corporate promise of prayer, "if two shall agree...it shall be done," (Mt 18:19).

The most stunning example of this corporate dwelling of God is written by Peter, a Jew! He wrote "Ye (plural) also, as living stones,



are builded up a spiritual house, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ," (1 Pet 2:5). God is not just with us, **He is in us** by His Spirit - that is, corporately (Jn 14:17).

### **THIS IS NEW TESTAMENT WORSHIP**

#### **B. The Church, Worship, and the χαρισματα**

Although there are several places where the χαρισματα or gifts are discussed, Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 give us the essence of New Testament teaching (1 Corinthians 14 is expounded in the appendix).

Romans 12 begins by introducing us to the practical life which flows from free grace in Christ (chps 1-11). Paul exhorts his readers to personal devotion and service, while warning them to have their minds transformed by truth so as to discern the will of God.

Having this as a backdrop, Paul encourages humility via examination as to the grace God has granted to them, or, as he identifies this concept, the measure of faith God has dealt every man. Paul has now laid the foundation for gifts and their use by the Roman congregation. Every man has a measure of faith, although it may be in unique spheres. Some saints prophecy (12:4), but only according to the proportion of faith given them (that is, the measure of understanding granted them by God's Spirit in Christ). Some serve, and must give themselves to this gift which their sovereign God saw fit to grant them (12:7) - as is true of teaching (12:7), exhorting, giving, ruling, and mercies (12:8). In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul will remind us that all ministries in the church are exercised in love, and Paul states the same in Romans 12:9.

What should be noticed is how Paul introduces the exercise of gifts by speaking of the state of our hearts, and then reminding us of the unity of the assembly within which the subsequent gifts will be used. The Romans are many members - with many diverse gifts - yet are one in purpose. Paul goes out of his way to point out: 1) differing gifts (12:6) and "all members have not the same office," (12:4); yet 2) they are "one body" and "members one of another," (12:4).

In this use of diverse gifts, the Romans were to "love without dissimulation," "be kindly affectionate one to another," in honor preferring one another," "given to hospitality," and more! **The point**

I would like to mention is that in Roman church life, the issues of love, affection, and such graces are a perpetual theme in all evangelical 20<sup>th</sup> century pulpits, but the practice of the gifts which are inseparately linked to the graces listed (indeed, the graces form the context of how to use our gifts) is more or less absent in our 20<sup>th</sup> century assemblies! How can this be?

*Worship is gifts exercised via graces!*

1 Corinthians 12 supports the themes of Romans at every point. First, the unity of the body is emphasized with Pauline statements such as "the body is one," (12:12), "by one Spirit we are baptized into one body," (12:13), "God has tempered the body together," (12:24), and as a result, Paul says, "there should be no schism."

Second, unity does not negate diversity. We find Paul telling the Corinthians that God has purposed "diversity of gifts...administrations...and...operations" in His Church. There are many members (12:12,14,20), yet God has set them in order as it has pleased Him (12:18).

Third, the Holy Spirit rules for the blessing and growth of the body. He enables us to confess Christ (12:3), grants the gifts (12:4,8), works these gifts in the saints (12:8-11), baptizes (12:13), and all these works are according to His sovereign will (12:11).

But fourth, ALL SAINTS have and should use these spiritual gifts. Paul says in the context of these gifts; "the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal (e.g. profit all in the body). To one...wisdom, to another...knowledge, to another faith," etc. Again, the diversity and use of these gifts is 1) "to profit withal" (12:7), and 2) these gifts are "tempered...that there should be no schism in the body" (12:24,25).

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**Note:** As with Romans 12, it seems the 20<sup>th</sup> century church encourages the application of graces but not the exercise of gifts, and this is surely to our detriment.

#### **C. The Church, Worship, and Congregational Devotion**

A preeminent theme of the gospel and the sinner is the joy of hearing the good news of forgiveness and the joy of the Christian life. Note just in Acts; "they that gladly received the Word" (2:41), "they (Christians)... ate their meat with gladness" (2:46), "they (Christians) departed... rejoicing" (5:41), "when the Gentiles heard this (the gospel), they were glad" (13:48). The epistles echo this

truth: "The kingdom of heaven is joy" (Rom 14:17), "we have all joy and peace in believing" (Rom 15:13), "Christ is preached...and I rejoice" (Phil 1:18), and "Rejoice evermore" (1 Thess 5:18). This initial joy in Acts, and the commonplace expressions of rejoicing in the epistles will carry over in Christian devotion and worship

Thus with praise, Christians express this aspect of worship in three ways: First, our redemption as a people praises God; we are "predestined to the adoption of children...to the praise of the glory of His grace," "that we should be to the praise of His glory," "unto the praise of His glory," (Eph 1:6,12,14). Second, our lives bring Him glory. Scripture says, "filled with the fruits of righteousness...unto the praise of God" (Phil 1:11), "your faith...might be found unto praise and honor and glory...of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:7). Third, there are the words of praise. The Word speaks of "the sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15), "Praise our God" (Rev 19:5), and even Hebrews says of Christ (quoting Psalms) "in the midst of the church I will sing praise to thee" (Heb 2:13). In summary, "Rejoice evermore," (Eph 5:18).

Thus Ephesians has Paul exhorting the saints regarding songs (New Testament songs), hymns (Old Testament songs), and spiritual songs (songs from the heart, i.e. impromptu?), "singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord" (Eph 5:19). Colossians says almost the same: "teaching and admonishing one another in "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col 3:16).

As to prayer, saints were to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:19). Paul constantly prayed for the saints he ministered to (Rom 1:9; Eph 3:14; Phil 1:4; Col 1:3; 1 Thess 1:2). When Paul laid out priorities in church life, prayer was first on his mind. In 1 Timothy 2:1, Paul says "**first of all**, supplications, prayers, intercessions...be made for all men." Soon after, he will exhort "men to pray every where, lifting up holy hands" (1 Tim 2:8). Women were to do the same, although their expression of holiness was "adorn(ing) themselves modestly (1 Tim 2:9). In 1 Corinthians 14:16, it is clear that *prayer* is in mind in the congregation when he says "when thou shall bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say 'Amen' at they giving of thanks," and again, "I will pray" (1 Cor 14:15). This is all worship.\*\*

\*\* Note the list of other activities in church worship; revelations, knowledge, prophesy, doctrine, Psalms, tongues,

interpretation - all for the edification of the body of Christ (1 Cor 14:6,26).

Lastly, a perusal of early Christian confessions and hymns in the New Testament gives us the depth of devotion to God and to Christ:

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace,  
good will toward men,” (Lk 2:14)

“For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto Him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen,” (Rom 11:33-36)

God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory,” (1 Tim 3:16)

“To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen,” (Jude 25)

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#### D. The Church, Worship, and the Word

When we peruse the restoration period in Israel's history (Ezra, Nehemiah), the importance of the Word in the renewal of God's people is evident. In Nehemiah we find, “they spoke unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses,” (Neh 8:1); “He read therein...before the men and the women,” (Neh 8:3); “they (the people) stood up in their place, and read in the book of the Law of the Lord their God,” (Neh 9:3); “on that day they read in the book of Moses,” (Neh 13:1).

The New Testament testifies to the centrality of the Word in the same sense as the Old Testament. Christ gave us His commands in



the gospels and revealed that more of His truth would come through the apostles. This is why we find statements in the epistles such as Paul's "you know what *commandments we gave you by Jesus Christ*," (1 Thess 4:2); Peter's "be mindful...of the *commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior*," (2 Pet 3:2); John's "Again, a new commandment I write unto you," (1 Jn 2:18); Jude's "remember ye *the words* which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ," (Jude 17).

Further, the apostolic words and letters were to be read to the churches. In Revelation, we read "blessed is *he that reads*, and they that hear," (Rev 1:3). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the brethren," (1 Thess 5:27). Colossians, echoing Thessalonians, states "when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans," (Col 4:16). This was so serious, that we find in 2 Thessalonians "if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him," (2 Thess 3:14).

Lastly, we have many serious exhortations regarding the Word and the doctrine contained in the Pastoral Epistles for the health and blessing of the hearers: "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine," "until I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine," "Take heed to thyself and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and those that hear thee," "hold fast the form of sound words," "Study to show thyself approved," "Preach the Word," "speak thou the things which become sound doctrine," (1 Tim 4:6,13,16; 2 Tim 1:13; 2:15; 4:2; Tit 2:1). This was leadership's duty with respect to the people of God and the ministry of the Word.

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#### **E. The Church, Worship, and the Ministry of Need**

One need not spend much time on this ministry. It is literally everywhere in the New Testament. It begins with the basic "he that giveth, let him do it with liberality" (Rom 12:8), and "for the ministry (*διακονίας*) of this service (giving), not only fills up the measure of the wants of the saints, but aboundeth...to God (2 Cor 8:12). The key here is that giving is a "ministry." Giving has the truest and

most Christlike of qualities when exercised in the Spirit. We give with singleness of heart (e.g. one motive - blessing to the recipient), (Rom 12:8); it is voluntary, (2 Cor 9:5,7); done with desire and eagerness, (2 Cor 8:4); cheerfully, (2 Cor 9:7); at times, sacrificially, (2 Cor 8:2); in summery, the New Testament ministry of giving is a true, freewill offering - 2 Cor 9:7 (As an important aside, Paul says "if I bestow all my goods to the poor...and have not love, it profits me nothing (1 Cor 13:2).

History establishes the aforementioned truths. When the needs of the early church arose, great efforts were made to meet them (Rom 15:26; Acts 11:27-30). Peter makes this absolutely clear as a priority when he ended his exhortation to his fellow apostle Paul by stating "only they (the Jerusalem apostles) would that we should remember the poor, the same which I am forward to do" (Gal 2:10). Even more wonderful in terms of ministry, Paul commands "us [to] do good to all men," (Gal 6:10).

Now giving and serving is also the essence of ministry and worship as the saints assemble. In the employment of spiritual gifts, we "seeketh not her own" and "thinks on the things of others (Phil 2:4). Indeed, if we, as the saints of God, **do not** care for the needs of others (saints), James says we have not faith James 2:14-16). **\*\* THIS IS NEW TESTAMENT WORSHIP.**

**\*\*** A comment must be made on the issue of the early church in Jerusalem "having all things in common" as a paradigm for all Christian giving. I believe there is good reason for such action (for in 1 Tim 6:17, Paul *does not say* 'charge them that are rich in this world to give up all their goods,' but he says for them to 'trust in the living God,' and 'that they do good...ready to distribute, willing to communicate.' The reasons for "communal" type life in Jerusalem was that - within a generation - Jerusalem would be reduced to rubble as prophesied by Christ in Matt 24:1ff; Lk 21:5ff; Mk 13:1ff, in particular the prophesy of Lk 21:20-24, 29-32. Radical things were to happen as well at Corinth, for Paul states, "the time is short," and therefore Paul admonishes his readers that "those who buy, as though they possess not...for the fashion of this world is passing away." There were near and radical persecutions and conflicts that were to arise soon, such that the "communal" issues of Acts 2, and the statements of 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 must be understood in their context.

## F. The Church, Worship, and the Centrality of Christ

The only perpetual ordinance of the New Testament is the Lord's Supper. The detail is given 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. This ordinance was a church/corporate ordinance as seen by the terminology of "ye come together", v.17,18,33,34; "ye assemble," v.20.

The Lord's Supper centered around Jesus the redeemer and the corporate proclamation of the Lord (11:23-26). It was a corporate meal which reflected the unity of the body in Christ, as reflected in the rebuke of verse 21, "one taketh before another," and the Pauline remedies in verses 33 and 34; "when ye come together, wait for one another" and "if any man is hungry, let him eat at home." If sharing God's provisions at the Lord's Supper did not occur, Paul was bold to say, "When therefore you assemble together [and do not share], **it is not to eat the Lord's Supper!**

If the Passover is any indication, along with the proclamation of Christ as Lord and the sharing of a common meal, there were probably songs along the lines of Matt 26:30, "And when they (our Lord and His apostles) had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives." Thus the ministries of proclamation, praise, and sharing mixed to give us worship during the Lord's Supper.\*\*

\*\* The issue of examination (11:27-29) *relates not to personal examination of our walk with Christ*, but our examination of the Lord's Body and our love and relationship with those in Christ as expressed in the sharing/fellowship of our common meal, common love, and common union in the Savior.

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