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## *Congregational Worship and Division*

We are the product of nearly 20 centuries of churchgoing. Our roots are firmly cemented in the beliefs that the church building is sacred and the worship service is the most important event of the week. These beliefs began with the advent of Catholicism, and the Reformation did little to alter it for Protestants. We have been raised to believe that Sunday is holy, and some states still have “blue laws” on the books to enforce it. Few words have more cultural significance than “church,” “Sunday,” and “worship.” These words are so steeped in tradition and wrapped by our emotions that going back to the Bible becomes an extremely touchy proposition. At the very least, we find it difficult to examine the subject with an open mind.<sup>1</sup>

**The Churches of Christ, as a whole, are hopelessly divided over the so-called “worship service” with its five prescribed rituals, namely: praying, singing, preaching, communion (Lord’s Supper), and contribution.** Out of the present concept of worship has developed a philosophy that has the Churches of Christ deadlocked into endless turmoil. As we read many Church of Christ journals, we quickly perceive that this body of believers has degenerated into a battlefield. It is virtually a war zone. What has created such fighting within the Churches of Christ? Pattern theology is the culprit. Of the twenty-five or more divisions within the Churches of Christ, the various divisions exist over the exact blueprint or pattern to be observed in carrying out the five rituals.

As stated above, the idea of a worship service is so steeped in the traditions of men and women that we can no longer distinguish between tradition and the Bible. **The basic concept of worship today is that worship begins on Sunday at 11a.m. and ends at 12 noon.** Many Christians advance the notion that worship is what we do during that one hour. Mike Root, minister for the Fairfax Church of Christ in Fairfax, Virginia, correctly points out that the phrase “Enter to Worship—Leave to Serve” is partly correct and partly wrong. In other words,

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Root, *Spilt Grape Juice: Rethinking the Worship Tradition* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1992), 17, 18. This book can be ordered from College Press (1-800-289-3300).

it is true that what we do in the assembly may be called worship, but we never stop worshipping. Worship is not like a faucet—turn on and off at will. Worship is one’s way of life.<sup>2</sup>

**As we peruse the New Testament, we immediately observe that there is not one verse that advances the notion that Christians are commanded to assemble on Sunday in order to worship.** As we trace the missionary journeys of Paul, the notion that Christians are commanded to congregate for worship is totally absent. We never read where Christians are told to “go to worship.” Why? Is it not because our way of life is worship? This is the reason that Paul admonishes the Christians at Rome to consider their behavior:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

Paul speaks of worship as presenting one’s body as a living sacrifice. In other words, worship is a life that is given in obedience to Christ. Now, it is true, that at one time worship was going to the Temple to offer up animal sacrifices. Today, Christians offer themselves as “living sacrifices,” which is their “spiritual act of worship.” Again, the author of Hebrews describes our service, or worship, this way: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship (*λατρεύομεν*, *latreuōmen*).<sup>3</sup> God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Hebrews 12:28-29).

As the author of Hebrews concludes his book, he again speaks of how we worship God acceptably: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (13:15-16). Whether we are assembled or not, our lives—twenty-four hours a day—are lives of worship. It is in this same vein that Paul reminds the Corinthians: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). **The issue is not whether worship takes place on Sunday morning when Christians gather as a corporate body, but whether or not God has ordained a ritualistic worship service with five acts to be performed in a prearranged style in order for worship to be true and not vain.** This concept of a “worship service” is totally foreign to the New Testament. This is just one of the many traditions inherited from our forefathers, not from the Bible.

Again, in the words of Root: “Worship is what you are—a worshipping creature and a sacrifice to God that is complete and continual.”<sup>4</sup> William Law correctly states: “It is very observable that there is not one command in all the Gospels for public worship. The frequent

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>3</sup> All Greek citations are from Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, *The Greek New Testament*, (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart) 1983, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> Root, *Spilt Grape Juice*, 20.

attendance at it is never so much as mentioned in all the New Testament.”<sup>5</sup> Again, with keen insight, he questions his readers:

Is it not exceedingly strange, therefore, that people would place so much emphasis upon attendance at public worship—concerning which there is not one precept of our Lord’s to be found—and yet neglect these common duties of our ordinary life which are commanded in every page of the Gospels?”<sup>6</sup>

The question is not over Christians coming together as a corporate body to encourage one another and to offer praise to God, but the point is: **Has God ordained a worship service with five rituals to be executed in a given style?** One example of why Christians come together is found in the Hebrew Epistle. In this book, the author of Hebrews encourages his readers: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

**This assembly was not called in order to perform certain religious rites, but rather, this get-together was called so that the believers could “spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”** But that was not all that the author had in mind. The destruction of Jerusalem was just around the corner (AD 70), thus, the believers were to “encourage one another” not to revert back to Judaism again in the face of that terrible fate that lay ahead.<sup>7</sup> We must never isolate a text from its context to make it teach something that it does not convey. It is true that the assembly is not unimportant; it is also true that we are to live within the communion of God’s church (*ἐκκλησία*, [ekklēsia] “assembly,” “community”). But, having said this, still there is not one thread of evidence to uphold the belief that God has foreordained a “worship service”—a gathering yes, but not an approved ritualistic worship service with five patterned acts.

## WHAT IS WORSHIP?

James B. Torrance<sup>8</sup> has captured the essence of Christian worship in the following comments: “Worship in the Bible is always presented to us as flowing from an awareness of

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<sup>5</sup> William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, originally published in 1728, edited and abridged by John W. Meister and Others (Philadelphia: Westminster, nd), 18. **William Law** (1686-1761) was an English cleric and theological writer.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>7</sup> These events were also mentioned by Jesus (see Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21). John also wrote about these same actions in the Book of Revelation—the destruction of Jerusalem. For a more detailed analysis of this subject, see Dallas Burdette, *Commentary on the Book of revelation: An Unraveling of the Olivet Discourse As a Preface to Understanding revelation*, Vol. 1 (Mainland, FL, 2013)226-362, for a detailed study of the “Eschatological Judgment in Matthew 24:1—25:13.”

<sup>8</sup> **James B. Torrance** (1923-2003) was professor emeritus of systematic theology at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He also served as a parish minister at Invergowrie (Dundee, Scotland) and as a lecturer at New College, University of Edinburgh. His books include *A Passion for Christ* (PLC Publications, 1999), co-written with his brothers, Thomas F. Torrance and David V. Torrance.

who God is and what he has done.”<sup>9</sup> Biblical worship is an outflowing of the heart in surrender to God’s ethical standards. On the other end of the spectrum, today, worship is visualized more as the “worship of performance.” In the words of Greg Ogden<sup>10</sup>: “The experience of worship in an institutional framework is something done to you, in front of you, or for you, but not by you.”<sup>11</sup> Not only is worship today conceived of as a “worship of performance,” but it is also identified with five prearranged acts performed on Sunday morning.<sup>12</sup> **Yet, the institutional concept of worship as five acts performed on Sunday morning is not biblical. This perception is based on traditions, not the Word of God.** This belief (five acts) about worship is based upon a misunderstanding of a statement found in the epistle to the Hebrews: “They (high priest) serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’” (Hebrews 8:5).<sup>13</sup>

This Scripture is cited to prove that God has ordained a set pattern, or blueprint, for an official “worship service.” The Christian community is not patterned after the Tabernacle. It is true that in the Tabernacle there were regulations. The author of Hebrews explains: “Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary” (Hebrews 9:1). For believers today, there are no “regulations for worship” or an “earthly sanctuary.” Jesus, in his conversation with the woman of Samaria, clearly set forth the distinctiveness of the Christian era:

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship (προσκυνούντας, *proskynountas*, to do reverence to) in spirit and in truth. (John 4:21-24)

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<sup>9</sup> James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996), 71.

<sup>10</sup> **Dr. Greg Ogden** is a writer, speaker, and discipleship teacher living in Monterey, California. He was formerly executive pastor at Christ Church of Oak Brook in Oak Brook, Illinois. He also served as the academic director of the doctor of ministry program and associate professor of lay equipping and discipleship at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. For 23 years, he served as a pastor with the Presbyterian Church (USA).

<sup>11</sup> Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 24.

<sup>12</sup> For a classic example of the five items of worship, see Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern* (Pensacola, FL: Goebel Music Publication, 1991), 392-395.

<sup>13</sup> See Dabney Phillips (1917-1992), *Restoration Principles and Personalities* (Alabama: Youth In Action, 1975), 19, where Phillips bemoans the fact that James O’Kelly, Elias Smith, and Abner Jones failed, according to Phillips, to go back to the New Testament pattern. He writes: “It is regrettable that they were unable to journey all the way back to the New Testament, for the pattern is there (Hebrews 8:5).”

## Worship Is Not Defined in the New Testament

There are at least five verbs and three nouns in the Greek text that are translated worship. The following citation is an extract from W. E. Vine<sup>14</sup> (1873-1949), which may explain the major thrust of this essay—worship is not defined in the New Testament:

*Notes:* (1) The worship of God is nowhere defined in Scripture. A consideration of the above verbs shows that it is not confined to praise; broadly it may be regarded as the direct acknowledgement to God, of His nature, attributes, ways and claims, whether by the outgoing of the heart in praise and thanksgiving or by deed done in such acknowledgement. (2) In Acts 17:25 **θεραπεύω** [*therapeuō*], “to serve, do service to” (so RV), is rendered “is worshiped.” See CURE, HEAL.<sup>15</sup>

### Five Verbs and Three Nouns

**An analysis of the five verbs and three nouns are never associated with a so-called worship service.** If God has ordained a worship service with its regulations, then we cannot help but wonder why none of the Greek verbs or nouns is ever associated specifically with what one does on Sunday morning. Today, many Christians will not extend the right-hand-of-fellowship to other believers if their “prescribed regulations” do not coincide with their particular brand of orthodoxy.

### Five Verbs Employed for Worship

One of the most frequently used words in the New Testament that is translated worship is **προσκυνέω** (*proskyneō*, to make obeisance, do reverence to). This word *proskunew* is used of an act of homage or reverence. This act of homage or reverence is associated with our way of life. This word is not employed in the New Testament to describe a so-called worship service with its foreordained five acts performed on Sunday morning. This word is not associated with the concept of “going to worship.”

Another verb that is translated worship is **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*, to revere). This word *sebomai* stresses the feeling of awe or devotion. Is devotion or awe something that is only associated with a so-called worship service? Is not awe and devotion something that envelope our way of life in response to God’s grace? Is this word employed in the New Testament with the concept of “going to worship”? Does this awe and devotion start at 11 a.m. and end at 12 noon? Or does this act of homage encompass our way of life twenty-four hours a day?

A third verb is **σεβάζομαι** (*sebazomai*, to honor religiously). Does “to honor religiously” begin at 11 a.m. and stop at 12 noon? Is this something that we turn on and off on Sunday morning? Is this word employed with the notion of “going to worship”? Is this honor something

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<sup>14</sup> **William Edwy Vine** (1873–1949) was an English Biblical scholar, theologian, and writer, most famous for his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. He is also the author of *You Can Learn New Testament Greek*. His writings are collected in *Collected Writings of W.E. Vine* (5 vols.).

<sup>15</sup> W. E. Vine, “Worship (Verb and Noun), Worshiping,” *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985), 686.

that Christians “go” to do? Or does this act of honor involve our way of life twenty-four hours a day?

Another word that appears frequently in the New Testament is the verb λατρεύω (latreuw, to serve, to render religious service or homage). Once more, this word is not identified by the New Testament writers as something that begins at 11a.m. and ends at 12 noon on Sunday. Paul uses the noun form **λατρεία** (*latreia*, serve, worship) in his Epistle to the Romans: “offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” [**λατρείαν**, *latreian*] (Romans 12:1).

The fifth verb that is translated worship is **εὐσεβέω** (*eusebeō*, to act piously towards). Is this something that occurs only on Sunday morning between 11a.m. and 12 noon? We are to act piously toward God twenty-four hours a day, not a set hour. This word is not associated with the concept of “going to worship.”

### Three Nouns Associated with Worship

Vine also lists three nouns: **σέβοςμα** (*sebosma*, an object of worship); **ἔθελοθησκεία** (*ethelothrēskeia*, will-worship); and **θησκεία** (*thrēskeia*, religion, worshiping).<sup>16</sup> James, our Lord’s brother, employs this Greek word (*thrēskeia*,) in his description of what true worship is all about:

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion (**θησκεία**, *thrēskeia*) is worthless. Religion (**θησκεία**) that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:26-27).

Again, this word is not employed with a so-called worship service on Sunday morning; rather, *thrēskeia* is associated with relationships and ethical behavior that is pleasing to God.

Worship, verb or noun, is often misunderstood by those who worship the Creator. **Today, worship is not something performed within a certain geographical location or a set time. Rather, worship is associated with our way of life in submission to God.** The predominant theory of worship—within the Churches of Christ—is generally associated with singing, praying, preaching, giving, and the Lord’s Supper. Today, many Christians are divided over the exact methodology to be performed in carrying out their five ritualistic acts, rather than reverence or devotion as their worship. The question that confronts every person is: Is there a specific paradigm or model for a so-called worship service commanded by God? Numerous Christians are divided over the divine pattern—something that the Bible is completely silent about.

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<sup>16</sup> See Vine for the various definitions listed, *Ibid.*, 686-687.

## CONCLUSION

The present concept of worship is the cause of much division among God's people. We are divided over something that God has not legislated. If God has not legislated, then we violate no law if we follow a different arrangement in our Sunday gatherings. If God has not ordained a worship service, then when we come together, we do not violate any scriptural principle if we praise God with the instrument. Nor do we violate any scriptural dogma if we use more than one cup (container) in the observance of the Lord's Supper.

Neither do we violate a scriptural code if we break the bread instead of pinching the bread during the observance of the Lord's Supper. Also, if we choose to use wine instead of grape juice, then no scriptural standard is violated. If God has not legislated concerning a prearranged worship service with a specific pattern or blueprint, then no sin is involved if we do not follow the particular behavior of someone else in his participation in singing, praying, giving, preaching, or communion. We are not denying that the various acts carried out during a corporate gathering are not acts of devotion or worship in response to God's grace. **The point of controversy surrounds the performance of the so-called five acts of worship.** Since God has not ordained a worship service with certain prescribed rituals to be carried out in a precise manner, we do not violate any scriptural principle if we do not perform the rituals in an exact manner as another congregation assembled as a corporate body.<sup>17</sup>

**The Bible does not provide us with any ready-made liturgies or services of worship. Worship must, above all, involve commitment to God in total service.** True worship consists in praise to God. Our worship involves our deepest devotion and a love that is directed toward God, not toward humanity. When does worship begin for the believer? We begin our worship by submitting to Christian baptism. Following baptism, true worship involves a life that is consecrated to God in one's daily walk. Worship is a response of men and women to the nature and action of God. Again, the words of Paul are fitting in concluding this message on "Congregational Worship and Divisions":

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship (*λατρείαν*, *latreian*, service). Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

True worship means that we love the Lord our God with the fullness of our hearts, with the comprehensiveness of our souls, and with the completeness of our minds (Matthew 22:37). When we have this type of attitude toward God, then this style of worship incorporates praise to God as a way of life—twenty-four hours daily, not just one hour on Sunday morning with five-

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<sup>17</sup> For a thorough analysis of worship, one should read the *Shelly—Dunning Debate* (West Monroe, Louisiana: William C. Johnson, 1977). In this debate Dwaine Dunning presents arguments that demonstrate that since God has not set forth a pattern for a worship service, then whether one sings with or without the instrument, one has not violated any command of God. Dunning is one of the first that I have read dealing with a so-called worship service that Christians introduced into the supposed biblical concept of worship.

ritualist acts performed in a precise way. My study of this subject has helped me to overcome my legalistic stance and to lead me into freedom in Christ. Our next study (Chapter 2) will focus more attention on what is “True Worship” in the biblical concept, not the traditional perception inherited from our forefathers.