

Worship As Commanded

“Knowing that my whole self is given as worship, I don’t see the importance of going to assemblies to worship.” “Is there a command for us to worship?” “Where do the Scriptures teach that the purpose of assemblies is for worship?” “Are we called to perform rituals of worship or to serve God by serving people?”

Although I am neither the scholar in residence nor the academic answer man, I continue to receive comments and questions like those above from readers. Having little time to devote to each inquiry, my answers are not very thorough. I think most of the inquirers already know the answers to their questions better than I, for they are persons who are making their own restudy of traditional teachings and practices. They want confirmation.

This brief column will add little to what I have already expressed in numerous essays in my books and newsletters. Perhaps, a few re-affirmations will be worthwhile.

When mention is made of the worship of disciples, what image comes to your mind? Does a sort of template modeled after our current assemblies in Protestant America appear? Must any new thought that you may entertain be squeezed in and made to fit that template somehow? Is revision of concepts too tedious, frightening, and unsettling?

From the start here, I will say that I will not even “search the Scriptures” to find a command to worship. Worship commanded, specified, and regulated by law would be a throw-back to Mosaic concepts. It would produce performance of rituals more than expressions of the heart. The heart cannot be commanded; it must be motivated. Love rather than law is the motivation without which all efforts to serve God are vain.

Commands require many attendant specifications and qualifications. A law would have to specify what, how, when, where, with whom, how often, how much, what purpose, and the intention of the worshipper. In earnest effort to please God in supposed commanded worship, we have spun a web of interpretative entanglement like the traditions accumulated around the Law of Moses. We who have approached the New Covenant writings as a code of law have experienced that entrapment. Our efforts to determine all the details of worship and service have led to the splintering of ourselves into many diverse, rejecting groups. And the remedy offered for this evil too often has been, “Be like us and we will be united.”

Although we have pieced together a “five-act” system of congregational worship by selecting statements, historical incidents, “laws from silence,” assumptions, and supposedly necessary inferences, no precepts or patterns define a system of vertical worship to God with the specifications mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Perhaps we have been influenced more by the corrections of abuse in assemblies (like 1 Cor. 11-14) than by positive instructions – what we can’t do rather than what we are free to do. And we have made unwarranted distinction between what we can do personally in daily life honoring God and what we can do collectively, thus making *the worship service* more holy than *the worshipful life*.

Worship is the natural reaction for the person sensitive to an awesome Creator. Though the pagans received no command or instructions as to how to worship, God expected awe from them whether they lived in Sodom, Nineveh, Egypt, or other nations

neighboring Israel (Read *Romans*, Ch. 1 &2). They were not informed about rituals or assemblies of worship, but no expression of reverence to the Creator was ever rejected by him. They might not have realized the love of God that we have revealed to us, but they could have his two requirements written in their hearts – to love man and his Creator.

That same awe should produce a worshipful life in all of us. It is an expression of life rather than proper rituals. Surely, we will communicate with God directly, but a ritual or assembly is not necessary for that. And when we are gathered with other worshippers, surely it is appropriate for us to worship together.

Does God command regular assemblies on the first day of each week for worship? There is no such command. Yet we have gathered statements and inferences, molded then together in a pattern, and then made them universally binding by our interpretations.

What about *Hebrews* 20:25, our prooftext for assemblies? God's dreadful day of chastisement was soon to come on God's son, Israel. It would be sore trial for the believing Jews. So the writer of the letter to them encouraged them to be in touch with each other to exhort and encourage one another. Nothing indicates that this was a universal command for all times to meet for ceremonial worship.

This is no effort to negate the value of assembling with others of like faith. "Birds of a feather will flock together" (Minsheu), points to our common interest which will cause us to want to be together. We all feel the need for each other. Even those who feel that they do not need the strength coming from the bodily presence of others will realize that others need the strength they can offer. Gatherings, whether private or public, are free to incorporate whatever activities will edify those present. Those gatherings are a means to an end rather than being the essential thing. Attendance to assemblies and participation in rituals are not the measures of spiritual stature but, if they fulfill their purpose, they will nurture spiritual growth.

The Psalmist is our hero in leading us in praise, yet I doubt if he felt compelled to go to a meeting and sing praises for an hour each Sabbath. Sometimes I wonder, as we go through the rituals again each week, if God might be saying to himself, "That is nice that they want to sing to me, but that is not exactly what I had in mind. I would prefer that they honor me by expressing love to one another and helping all my people on earth. I wish they would read again what I told my people through Micah."

So, let Micah speak again (6:6-8): "'With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

(For more, read *Free To Accept*, Chapter 17, "Thursday Is The Lord's Day Too!," Chapter 18, "Not Forsaking the Assembly," and Chapter 19, "Acts 20:7 One More Time.)
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