

Chapter 14

PIE-SHAPED RELIGION

We have been building a lot of pie-shaped church buildings and trying to fill them with pie-shaped religion.

All of us have seen the sectional graphs used to shame us to greater activity. In them proportionate wedges show how much of our time or money we use for work, sleep, recreation, and such, and then there is the thin slice which is given in worship and service. That thin little wedge of the pie is intended to represent our frail claim for righteousness.

A similar illustration speaks of the six days God gives us for our personal use and the one day He gives for worship and service – which day many also appropriate for themselves, except for an hour or two or three. Another illustration reveals that God gives us 604,800 seconds each week which we appropriate generously to various necessary activities while we reserve only 3,600 seconds for worship and service to Him – only 1/168th of our time given to the Lord!

These illustrations imply that the only worship and service is formal, public, organized, and usually related to the assemblies. Attendance is usually the most visible expression of our religion, so it becomes the measuring stick of our religion. All the Christian qualities which reveal our character and rule our daily conduct run a poor second in importance to attendance.

Paul would have us to give the whole pie to God. *“I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”* (Rom 12:1). Paul alludes to worship under the Law of Moses. Under that system, the worshipper selected – set apart, dedicated, made holy, consecrated, sanctified – the animal to be offered. At the specified time, the animal was taken to the tabernacle/temple where the Presence of God dwelt. There it was presented to the priest to be offered by him through the high priest in a specified, ritualistic manner. The priest inspected the animal to see that it was acceptable; then he took its life as an offering. An offering is a sacrifice. To sacrifice is to offer. This procedure was considered acceptable worship.

Our sacrifice is the offering of the whole self – the body and all that relates to it. It is set apart, committed, dedicated, made holy, sanctified in daily life rather than in a single dying act. This continuous offering is not taken to a priest or place at a certain time to fulfill ritualistic details. The sanctified one does not go to a priest, for he is a priest himself, offering himself through his High Priest. Worship and service does not take him to a temple, for *he is a temple* of the Presence of the Spirit. His service is not at set times with detailed rituals, for all of his life is an offering to God, totally sanctified.

This becomes acceptable sacrifice, a continuous offering. Worship and service is all that goes on in the temple! All the activity in the Jewish temple was not ritual, but the work of the Levites in caring for the vessels, mopping the floor, or repairing was a necessary part. The whole of the

temple operation was a continuous offering even as, in a ritualistic way, the showbread and candles were continuous, living sacrifices.

Although there are different shades of meaning in the different words used for worship, there is no clear distinction between worship and service. Some actions and thoughts are directed specifically to God (we have ritualized these into a *worship service*); some are directed to other people, and some are rendered toward self in the maintaining of the temple. When one's life is dedicated to God, whatever he does is worship/service. It is not a matter of "Take time to be holy," for he is holy. It is not a matter of "Lord, we come before Thee now," for we are in Him and his Spirit is in us constantly. Through our commitment as a disciple, we "*continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*" (Heb. 13:15).

As long as one is living with Christ as Lord in his life, he is a whole-life offering in worship. This will include all the mundane, secular things that relate to life. Although he may be working at a job, mowing his lawn, vacationing with his family, or taking medicine, these are not selfish, earthly, materialistic goals. They are a part of the upkeep of the temple which is continually devoted to God in all of its purposes.

The concept of segmented worship/service makes some questions difficult to answer. If one hour of formal religion per week is not enough, will two, three, fifteen, or thirty be sufficient? Similar questions may be asked about the percentage of giving. If the size of the slice of the pie is determined, whose is the remainder? Is the rest holy? How could this picture whole-life, continuous offering?

Usually the wedge of the pie is made to relate to what has been defined as *the five items of worship* – singing, praying, teaching, giving, and communing (or "taking communion," as many say, as though communion is something you can eat or drink!). For many years, I accepted, taught, and defended this *five items of worship* concept. After all, anyone who "searched the scriptures" here and there could find pieces of this puzzling pattern to put together. And surely no one would be simple enough to include fasting, the love feast, foot washing, lifting up holy hands, elders anointing the sick and praying for them, distributing to the needs of the saints, or the holy kiss (which is commanded five times!) as acts of worship!

We have defined and specified all the fine points of these five acts of worship feeling assured that the "All-Seeing Eye" watches intently to see that we tithe all the mint, dill, and rue. We have made God a God of quibbles. The awesome wrath of the God of the universe may be so aroused by our singing while passing the cup, for instance, that He may damn the whole assembly to eternal hell! How did we ever develop such a theology?

Is a housewife worshipping God more acceptably while singing in an assembly than when expressing the same feeling while cooking dinner or while singing along with recorded spiritual songs? Is it worship to "lay by in store" to help the needy, but less so to help the poor yourself, or to work on the job so you will have resources to help the poor? Are adoring thoughts inspired by singing "How Great Thou Art" in assembly more worshipful than adoring thoughts inspired by viewing nature on a picnic? Are appreciative reflections on the atonement less worship when they come while lying awake in bed than those that come while participating in the Lord's

Supper? The value is not in keeping details of a ritual precisely, but in what we think and express.

According to the system of sacraments developed by the Catholic Church, a sacrament is a visible rite or ceremony through which God's grace is supposed to be bestowed upon the worshipper. We have inherited too much of that concept, assuming that special grace is dispensed through our acts of worship, if we keep all the specified details of the rituals. Actions of worship do not draw down God's grace or achieve justification. We don't worship to be justified but because we have been made righteous by His gift. What we do in our assemblies, as well as in the daily consecrated life, is to gain strength and to impart strength to others. Mood and quietness have little connection with this worship.

Our singing is not for the benefit of God but to teach and admonish one another. Our prayers are for our needs and for the needs of others. Our giving is not to supply God's needs but those of people. Our teaching is for the benefit of people. In the communion we renew our faith in the atonement and proclaim that atonement to others. These actions are done toward God only in the sense that Jesus expressed, "*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me*" (Matt. 25:40).

While exploring these ideas, it is good to recall that no assembly was referred to as a worship service by any inspired writer. They did not "go to worship," for their lives were a worship/service. The activities in their assemblies were for the benefit of those present. Read I Corinthians 14 carefully to see the repeated emphasis that all done in the assembly was to be for the up-building of the disciples. In verse 26, Paul instructs, "*Let all things be done for edification.*" Those assemblies were not sessions of mystical communion with God, but a sharing with God's people. Attendance and participation is not to get our score card of righteousness checked, but to build up others and to be built up. Services and programs that do not accomplish either are meaningless, if not detrimental. The apportioning of our time and resources between the formal and informal worship/service in the committed life is left entirely to the judgment of the individual.

In limiting the concept of worship, I have quoted Colossians 3:17 countless times: "*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.*" I applied that to our exercises in the assembly, and there alone, as a demand for specific authority for each activity. However, the context is about the kind of life we should lead, with special directives to wives, husbands, children, and slaves. Then, in verse 23, he sums up, "*Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men.*" He calls for a whole-life honoring of our Lord as we wear His name.

I also coupled "*whatever is not of faith is sin*" with "*faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" in a misapplication of scripture to limit the concept of worship. In the first passage, Paul is speaking of a person's violating his conscience by going against his faith. In the second, Paul is arguing for the Gentile acceptance and universal offer of salvation proved by the fact that Christ sent His message and messengers to the Gentiles. It has nothing to do with worship.

We have been warned many times by sincere teachers against additions to the five items of worship by use of the example of Nadab and Abihu, who were zapped for offering strange fire which the Lord had not commanded (Lev. 10:1-2; 16:12). However, persons were not punished for adding wine to the Passover meal (Lk. 22:14-18; Matt. 26:26-28), or for adding dancing before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:12-14; Psalms 149:3), or for adding the whole synagogue service. Nadab and Abihu had been given complete instructions which they defied. In the other examples, there was effort to honor God rather than to defy him.

How can worship be limited to five specifics, which are not so specific, when our bodies are to be presented as a living offering of worship?

In Lovington, New Mexico I had the unforgettable experience of being invited to speak to the Catholic youth group. I was allowed time to tell of my beliefs to be followed by a period for questions from the listeners. I was shown the utmost courtesy. In the question period, one of the sponsors asked, "If I should devise some personal way to let people know I was honoring Christ, so that each time they saw me, they would be reminded of my love for Him – some way – say, like wearing my hat sideways, would that be a sin?" How would you answer? I agreed that Christ could be honored that way.

I often wear a symbolic fish on my lapel to honor Christ. Some use appropriate plaques and bumper stickers. These can be worshipful expressions of praise and adoration. Some publish literature, write spiritual songs, make recordings of spiritual songs, do works of spiritually oriented art, or put beauty in a church building to honor Christ. These things stand as a continual expression of adoration, a living worship/service. Even after the worshipper has died, "he, being dead, yet speaketh."

One might keep a light in his window or tie a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree and let others know that these were symbols of his adoration to God. I have no reason to believe that God would be horrified at such a worshipful gesture. Again, our worship is not just in specific rituals or symbols, but in "*whatever you do, in word or deed.*"

Whatever is designed to build up and strengthen our own faith or that of others can be acceptable worship/service – whether in the assembly or in daily life.

Let's give God the whole pie instead of a slice. []

(Cecil Hook; Chapter 14 of *Free in Christ* published in 1984.)