

Part 3

The Meetings of the Assembly

Peter Ditzel

If we are going to conduct our assemblies according to Scriptural guidelines, we must be clear about their purpose. Are we supposed to meet to listen to a sermon? Are meetings supposed to be praise and worship services? Why did the first-century Christians assemble?

Each week, millions of people go to a church building to attend a worship service. Although the details of this service vary from one denomination to another, the central focus involves—at least in traditional churches—the congregation sitting in pews and listening to someone deliver a sermon. Very popular in some churches today is a more "contemporary" form of worship that minimizes the sermon in favor of a "praise and worship" service that is largely music. Whether the service is traditional or contemporary, almost no one questions whether going to a "worship service" is what Christ intended for His New Covenant assembly, the *ekklēsia*. Yet, that is what I am going to do in this article. Did Christ intend something altogether different from what we call a "worship service?" Are the meetings of the saints supposed to be "worship services?"

What the New Testament Says About "Worship Services" in the *Ekklēsia*

Nothing.

A Life of Worship

That's right. The New Testament says nothing about Christ's *ekklēsia* meeting for "worship services." To isolate worship to something done once a week in a special service corrupts what real worship is for believers. Worship is not something Christians are supposed to go to. It is not something found only in a sermon that God's saints listen to; it is not something isolated in a corporate prayer, or even in songs that congregants sing in a "praise and worship service."

To the Samaritan woman whom He met at the well, Jesus said,

Woman, believe me, the hour comes, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, will you worship the Father.

Copyright © 2014 wordofhisgrace.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article only if reproduced in full with no alterations and keeping the copyright statement and this permission statement intact. Unless otherwise noted, Bible references are from the World English Bible (WEB).

assemblymeetings3.pdf

You worship that which you don't know. We worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to be his worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

John 4:21-24

Jesus wasn't merely saying that believers would turn to church buildings as places of worship instead of to Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim. He was saying that worshipping in spirit and in truth is something God's people do in all places and in all times. We are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God lives in us (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22). Worship isn't a service we go to. Worship occurs wherever we are. It is a way of life. Christians worship God by living their lives to His glory. Christian worship may be described as total and constant highest respect and reverence for God.

I want to particularly point out that we must not be deceived into thinking that the emotions we feel—such as when we sit in a beautiful cathedral, hear a sermon delivered by a talented orator, or sing inspiring songs—are worship. The Bible never says that feelings are worship, and we must be careful not to confuse the two.

The word "worship" in the New Testament is usually translated from the Greek word, *proskuneō*, which literally means to kiss towards or lick someone's hand like a dog. It was used to refer to prostrating or bowing oneself toward a superior. When used of true worship, it implies the humbling of ourselves and magnification of God. Another word occasionally translated "worship" is *sebomai*. It means to revere or adore or to feel a devotion for. True worship involves recognizing the greatness of God and doing what we can to serve Him.

Latreia is a word related to worship. It comes from the verb *latreuō*, which means to worship through service. *Latreia* is often translated as "service," but carries the idea of worship. It was used to refer to the animal sacrifices and other temple rituals of the Old Testament: "Now indeed even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service [*latreia*], and an earthly sanctuary" (Hebrews 9:1). In regard to New Testament service, however, it refers to the sacrifice of ourselves in service to others, which is our way of worshipping God.

A literal translation of Romans 12:1 says, "Then I exhort, brethren, by the compassions of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy, well-pleasing to God, which is your logical service." The word "service" is *latreia*. The *Contemporary English Version* captures the sense of Romans 12:1-2: "Dear friends, God is good. So I beg you to offer your bodies to him as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing. That's the most sensible way to serve God. Don't be like the people of this world, but let God change the way you think. Then you will know how to do everything that is good and pleasing to him."

By presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, Paul means that we are to give our time, efforts, and resources. In the verses that follow, Paul mentions just a few of the different gifts God gives to each believer that we may use to serve Him in worship.

In Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus also spoke of how serving others is a way of serving God:

But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will tell those on his right hand, "Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?" The King will answer them, "Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Matthew 25:31-40

So, for the Christian, instead of worship being compartmentalized as something we do one or two times a week in a special building, worship is the way we live our lives in service to others and, thus, to God.

The Example of the First-Century *Ekklēsia*

I want to mention that this series of articles has already addressed the fact that some meetings of the *ekklēsia* should be devoted to the Lord's Supper (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/assemblymeetings2.htm>). Eating the Lord's Supper was very important to the first-century assembly, and they did it frequently. By eating the Lord's Supper, believers remember Christ and His death for our sins, which is the very basis for our faith. If an assembly meets for no other reason, it should at least meet to eat the Lord's Supper.

The first-century *ekklēsia* met for other reasons as well. They spoke in tongues and interpreted tongues (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:2, 26), prophesied (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:3), gave revelations and knowledge and wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:8; 14:26), prayed (1 Timothy 2:8), sang (1 Corinthians 14:26), taught (1 Corinthians 12:28), and judged what was said (1 Corinthians 14:29). The various forms of direct revelation were necessary before the completion of the Bible. Today, prophecy, knowledge, wisdom, and tongues are not part of the meetings of the *ekklēsia*.

All of this was, of course, done to God's glory, and, thus, God was worshipped. But to call the meetings "worship services" would have been alien to early Christians. From the list of what they did, we can see that the purpose of the meetings could be boiled down to receiving and passing on revelation, teaching, praying to communicate concerns to God, and judging what others spoke, all for the purpose of edifying or building each other up (1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 4:12, 16). Two or three men spoke (perhaps more if judging and prayers are counted). Totally missing from these meetings was what we call a sermon.

No Preaching or Sermonizing in the House Assemblies

Preaching [from the Greek words *kērussō*—"herald"; *euaggelizō*—to announce good news; or *kataggellō*—to announce] was reserved for the general public. It was an announcement of the Gospel and an exhortation [*parakaleō*—to call or summon to one's side] or call to believe. To give you a few examples of preaching, we see those scattered by persecution going around preaching the Word (Acts 8:4); Phillip preaching the Gospel in Samaria (verse 12); Phillip preaching to the eunuch (verse 35); Philip preaching the Good News to the cities (verse 40); Paul and Barnabas preaching the Good News in Lycaonia,

Lystra, Derbe and the surrounding region (Acts 14:6-7); Paul and Barnabas preaching the Good News in Derbe (verses 20-21); Paul explaining that those who bring the Good News cannot preach unless they are sent (Romans 10:15); Paul saying that he preaches Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23); Paul teaching that those who preach or proclaim [*kataggellō*] the Good News should live from it (1 Corinthians 9:14); and so forth. Clearly, preaching is the announcement of the Gospel to those who are not yet believers. True preaching is not what we often call preaching or sermonizing in institutional churches. It was the presenting of the Gospel message to sinners. It was not done in the assemblies of believers in their houses. True preaching also must not be confused with modern altar calls. For an article on why the altar call is unbiblical and a mockery of the means God uses to bring people to salvation, see "The Invitation System and the Altar Call" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/invitationaltarcall.htm>).

In the two related verses where some English translations say that Paul "preached" to the brethren, we find that they are poor translations. The King James Version, for example, has this for Acts 20:7: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight." "Preach" is from the Greek word *dialegomai*. This word does not mean to preach. As you might guess from the sound of the word, it means to have a dialog, a conversation, a discussion, or to reason with someone. This is a much better translation: "Now on the first of the week, the disciples having been gathered together to break bread, Paul began holding a discussion with them, being about to be departing the next day, and he kept prolonging the word until midnight" (*The Analytical-Literal Translation of the New Testament of the Holy Bible*). "Word" is from *logos*, which has many meanings, including "word," "reasoning," and "discourse."

In verse 9, the King James Version again translates *dialegomai* as "preaching" when "discussing" would have been better. Paul was neither preaching to unbelievers, nor was he sermonizing to the brethren. He was holding a discussion with them. If "break bread" in verse 7 means that they had eaten the Lord's Supper, it may not have been a good time for Paul to hold such a discussion. As I mentioned in Part 2 (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/assemblymeetings2.htm>), this is because it is difficult to teach or listen to someone teach while eating and fellowshiping. But he likely did so anyway because he was leaving the next day.

Summary

In this installment, we've seen that worship is not something isolated from the rest of our lives which we do in a church building, but is a way of life. Assemblies of the *ekklesia*, rather than being worship services or evangelistic meetings, were a sharing by believers of revelation and teaching that they used to build each other up. Preaching was for evangelism outside of the assembly meetings, and what we know of as sermons are not found in the Bible. Those who spoke in the assemblies presented orderly discourses or dialogs that the other brethren in the assembly could then question and judge.

In the next installment, I'll discuss in more detail what the meetings were like and how what we know of these early meetings can help us in our assemblies today. Since we don't receive direct revelation or speak in tongues today, what are we to do in our meetings? I'll also spend some time with 1 Corinthians 14:26, which is often used by promoters of the house church movement to say that everyone can speak in a meeting. Is this what it is saying? Or does this interpretation actually contradict Paul's intention?