

WORSHIP

The Christian's Highest Occupation

Alfred P. Gibbs

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CHAPTER ELEVEN OUR AUTHORITY FOR WORSHIP -- THE WORD OF GOD

3. The Scriptures Alone Must Be Our Authority in Worship

Having considered some of the false conceptions of worship, and examined some wrong estimates of it; we now come to a consideration of what constitutes the believer's sole authority regarding worship. This can be stated in three words: the Holy Scriptures. Just as the word of God alone, without any additions and subtractions, is our only authority for the way of salvation and its assurance; so, in every matter pertaining to doctrine, life and godliness, it must also be the sole and final court of appeal. The need for this will surely be obvious to every right thinking individual.

When a person receives an invitation to be presented to a king, or the head of a nation, he immediately consults the regulations governing such receptions in order to conform to the rules of court etiquette. He would be foolish indeed who would argue: "I'll go just when I wish, dress as I please and behave exactly as I want. If the king doesn't like it, he can lump it. I've got my own ideas of how these affairs should be run!" Such a person would soon find himself in disfavor with the king, and quickly conducted outside the palace!

One's conduct in society is governed largely by certain established customs which have been collected and recorded in books of etiquette. Emily Post is the recognized authority on such matters in the U.S.A. All those who desire to succeed in the social world, not only secure, but "read, mark and inwardly digest" all this authoritative information, by which to regulate their social behavior in any given circumstance. One is saved much embarrassment by so doing. Even games must be played accordingly to definite rules, and the authority most quoted is "Hoyle." All disputed matters regarding the playing of certain games are referred to this famous authority. The saying: "It is according to Hoyle," is the final word on any mooted question.

Since certain established rules and regulations are necessary to govern our behavior in the presence of a high dignitary, or our fellow men; what shall be said regarding the transcendently more important matter of our approach to the great God of the universe, and our behavior in His presence? It is essential that there be a recognized authority on this matter, and God has supplied this need in the Divinely-inspired revelation He has given to us in the Bible. We have not been left to our own devices in this regard, but we possess, in the Scriptures, an authoritative source of information regarding this vitally important question.

(1) As seen in the Old Testament

God's instructions in the Old Testament regarding the construction of the Tabernacle, with which the worship of Israel was closely identified, were given in particular detail to Moses. He was enjoined many times to take great care that all things should be done "**according to the pattern**" God had given him (Exodus 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8; Hebrews 8:5).

The last chapter of Exodus records how completely Moses followed these instructions in the design of the tabernacle. Seven times over the phrase is repeated that he did this or that, "**as the Lord commanded Moses**" (vss. 19, 22-23, 25, 27, 29, 32).

It is not surprising, therefore, that we read: "**Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle**" (vs. 34). It was God's response to a work that had been done according to His directions.

(2) As seen in the New Testament

When we turn to the pages of the New Testament we discover that worship is no longer connected with a Tabernacle, or a Temple made by human hands.

The Aaronic priesthood, with all its elaborate ritual, came to an end at the sacrifice of Christ. By that one sacrifice, which He offered "once and for all," the question of sin has been settled before a holy God. Every sinner, who now rests in Christ's finished work, receives Him by faith as his own Saviour, and owns Him as Lord, is not only saved eternally, but is constituted a priest unto God, with the privilege of coming into His presence to worship.

Christ is now the believer's great High Priest and, through Him, each believer may come boldly into the presence of God, and offer to Him the sacrifice of his heart's appreciation in praise and worship: "**Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation . . . By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name**" (Hebrews 9:10; 13:15) and "**Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ**" (I Peter 2:5).

Rather than hard and fast rules concerning worship, we find certain broad principles laid down, to which we shall do well to take heed and follow as a pattern.

As one reads and rereads the pages of the Acts and the Epistles, he will be impressed with certain well defined features which characterized the early assemblies of Christians, as led by the Spirit, they sought to gather in the name of the Lord Jesus in assembly, or church fellowship.

These assemblies, which began as a result of God's blessing on the preaching of the apostles and others, multiplied in a remarkable way, as described in the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

In due course, letters penned by Divine inspiration were addressed to these various companies of Christians. From these epistles we may also learn much of the order that obtained in these assemblies, and the principles that characterized them. Some of these letters were written to correct abuses that obtained; as, for instance, the epistles to the Corinthians and the Galatians. Others were written for encouragement, and still others for establishment in doctrine.

Thus we have, in the New Testament, all we need in the way of guidance for the worship and service of God's people today.

Now let us consider, very briefly, some of these distinguishing features which marked these New Testament assemblies of regenerated believers, remembering that this is the Divine pattern which has been left for us to follow.

(a) These assemblies were composed of companies of believers where Christ was acknowledged as Lord.

“Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (I Corinthians 1:2)

Christ was the gathering Center. They met in His name alone: **“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”** (Matthew 18:20). They acknowledged His supreme Headship, not only of the Church as a whole, but of each local assembly of believers: **“And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle . . . The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches”** (Revelation 1:12-13, 20) and **“And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all”** (Ephesians 1:22-23).

There was no uncertainty in people's minds, in that day, as to who was the Head of the Church. There was no theologically-trained and humanly-ordained “clergyman,” answerable to a synod or diocese, to officiate at the Lord's Supper, or to “administer the sacraments” and, apart from whose presence, the Lord's supper could not be celebrated. Christ was the Host at His own supper and all the believers His privileged guests.

(b) Each local assembly, wherever it met, was autonomous.

That is to say, each assembly was responsible directly to the Lord alone for its existence, order and discipline. Scripture contemplates no such thing as amalgamations, or combinations of assemblies, with one central governing body, such as is seen in Christendom today. No assembly interfered in the affairs of another assembly, but each was a distinct unity. Yet, though outwardly distinct, these assemblies were united to each other by the strong invisible bond of a common loyalty to Christ and His Word.

(c) Each believer in an assembly was recognized as a priest unto God, with liberty to exercise this priesthood, as led by the Spirit, the brethren audibly and the sisters inaudibly: **“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law”** (I Corinthians 14:34) and **“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”** (I Peter 2:9) and **“And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen”** (Revelation 1:6).

There is no mention whatever of any prearranged program which was followed to the letter in their worship meetings. Nothing is said about appropriate prayers composed and selected by a specially appointed committee and recited during the service. No distinction is even contemplated between so-called “clergy” wearing colorful robes, and “laity.” It did not exist in those days. All believers occupied the same position as being **“priests unto God.”**

(d) Each assembly recognized and gave liberty for the exercise and development of each spiritual gift, bestowed by the Lord upon the members of His body: **“For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”** (Ephesians 4:12) and **“For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will . . . But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all”** (I Corinthians 12:8-11; 14:26).

These gifts were not confined, in those days, to one man called “the minister.” There was a multiplicity of gifts which, when exercised under the guidance and power of the Spirit, were used of God to build up the whole assembly and supply all its spiritual needs.

(e) Each assembly had room for all the word of God.

No assembly “specialized” in a certain truth at the expense or the exclusion of other truths. Their motto was: “All the truth of God for all the people of God.” There were no “non essentials,” when it came to Divine revelation: **“And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified”** (Acts 20:32) and **“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works”** (II Timothy 3:16-17).

(f) These assemblies were not divided into a number of different denominations, as we see in Christendom today. There was no possibility, in those days for a convert to be besieged by various denominations, all pressing their claims for his church membership, allegiance and support.

There was only one membership of the one body, and fellowship was enjoyed with every member of that body. Each person, when saved, associated himself with an assembly of believers in the particular place or district where he lived.

Paul, by the Spirit, roundly condemned the rise of factions and parties in the Corinthian assembly: **“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name . . . And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon”** (I Corinthians 1:10-15; 3:1-10).

The New Testament contemplates neither denominationalism, nor interdenominationalism, but affirms the great truth of undenominationalism.

(g) Each assembly was composed of believers only, or, at least, only those who had professed to believe on the Son of God.

These New Testament assemblies did not consist of a mixture of saved and unsaved, as is seen in Christendom today: “And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.) (Acts 5:13-14).

The letters sent to these churches were addressed to those who were “in Christ Jesus” (Romans 1:7; I Corinthians 1:2; II Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1, etc.).

(h) These assemblies gladly welcomed to their fellowship all Christians who were sound in doctrine, moral in life, or in good standing with the assembly from whence they came.

They did not create artificial “tests of fellowship,” but received one another “to the glory of God”: “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).

There were no “back seats” for the “dear brother, or sister in Christ,” who was “not in fellowship” with them!

It was recognized that the Lord’s Supper was for the Lord’s people, and that life in Christ, and not light on the Scriptures was the essential basis for fellowship: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3).

These assemblies were places where godly discipline could be maintained.

It was the disorders in the Corinthian assembly that brought forth Paul’s letter of rebuke, in which is contained the well known exhortation: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Corinthians 14:40).

Overt sin must be judged and dealt with in the assembly, if it is to be the holy Temple God intends it to be: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are . . . It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” (I Corinthians 3:16-17; 5:1-6).

Thus, as has been before stated,

The worship of the Lord must be guided by the word of the Lord. The holy Scriptures must be read, meditated in and obeyed implicitly, if both the individual believer, or an assembly of believers, is to offer worship that is acceptable to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Each Christian is responsible to God to “search the Scriptures” for himself, and to “study to show himself approved unto God” in this matter of worship, as also in every other department of his Christian life. His motto should be that of a great man of God who said: “Apply thyself wholly to the Scriptures, and apply the Scriptures wholly to thyself.”

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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