

Congregational Worship

God has always been concerned with the manner in which He is worshipped. At the beginning, you will remember that Cain's sacrifice toward God was rejected because it was not offered "by faith" (Heb. 11:4). Years down the line, Nadab and Abihu would be consumed with fire from God for their worship involving "profane fire" (Lev. 10:1,2). Still later, Solomon would encourage all those who go up to worship God to "walk prudently... rather than give the sacrifice of fools" (Eccl. 5:1). Yes, it is very clear that God has always been concerned about the manner in which He is worshipped.

Rightly so, faithful Christians have carried forth this concept into our day, vehemently defending the worship of the New Testament church against the onslaught of denominationalism and liberalism. Repeatedly, Christians have stood their ground on issues such as instrumental music in the worship assembly or women ascending to the pulpit, arguing the word of God does not provide for these actions.

We (I speak for the Christians I know; hopefully it is the same for you), have done an admirable job in letting our denominational friends know why we oppose instrumental music in the worship assembly, women preachers, and a quarterly observance of the Lord's Supper. We are all, generally, very good about pointing out the faults and failures of others in the religious world (and don't get me wrong, there is certainly a time for such- 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 3:15). However, as we get to the heart of this article, I pose this question: in what acts of worship did the assembled New Testament church engage? It is both dishonest and dangerous to refuse and refute specific acts of congregational worship that others engage in if you and I cannot identify the plan God has laid out for the way in which He is to be worshipped when the church is assembled together. With this in mind, let's open our Bibles and identify God's plan for congregational worship.

Perhaps there is no better place to turn in our New Testaments to understand God's plan for congregational worship than to an epistle written to correct problems with a congregation's worship. The first epistle of the Corinthians contains a great deal of information on the worship of the New Testament church; we will be focusing our attention primarily on this text. The epistle of 1 Corinthians lays out five activities which are to take place when the church comes together to worship: observance of the Lord's Supper, a study (hearing/declaration) of God's message, prayer, singing, and a contribution of funds by individuals.

The Lord's Supper

The observance of the Lord's Supper is a practice which the Corinthians were, simply, ruining. Beginning in chapter 11, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their conduct relating to the Lord's Supper. The divisions which had been mentioned early on in the epistle were manifesting themselves in the assembly and had a direct bearing on the observance of the Lord's Supper. In Corinth, members of the church were perverting this act of worship into a common meal (11:18-22). As Paul writes to correct their perversions of this memorial, he includes information on the design and meaning of the Supper. With regard to the elements used in the Lord's Supper, Paul mentions two: bread and drink. While Paul was not present at the institution of the Lord's supper, the event was revealed to Him by the Lord. It is to the instituting of the Lord's Supper that Paul makes reference here, and that reference clears up a bit more regarding the bread and drink for us. The bread, according to Mt. 26:17-30, would have been unleavened bread; the drink, specifically looking at Mt. 26:29, was the juice from the fruit of the vine. Paul's reference to what is recorded in Matthew 26 reveals to us the elements which are to be used in the Lord's Supper: unleavened bread and fruit of the vine. Just as God gave Cain and Abel commands which were not to be disregarded, neither can we disregard the instructions of the Lord through Paul on the elements of the Lord's Supper. As to the meaning of the Supper, Paul records that the

observance of the Lord's Supper was a " [proclamation of] the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). With all of this in mind, notice what Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:18-20. The Lord's Supper, according to Paul, is to be observed as part of the assembly. Again, he makes a similar statement in 11:33, warning against the divisions which plagued Corinth. Eating and drinking can occur at restaurants and houses, as Paul mention in 11:20-22, but the observance of the Lord's Supper is divinely limited to the local assembly.

Declaring and Hearing God's Will

A second activity which is to occur when the local church is assembled is the declaration of God's will with the goal of edification and exhortation. Paul takes up a consideration of how the Corinthians were fairing in this aspect of public worship in chapter 14. Admittedly, there are some limitations to the specifics of the situation under view in Corinth, but those limitations do not change the principle. Those limitations will be discussed later in this article. Apparently the Corinthians had been involved in arguments over the superiority of certain spiritual gifts, gifts which were most certainly being exercised within the assembled church (14:5). Paul writes, not to discourage the usage of such spiritual gifts (1 Thess. 5:19), but rather to give an order and structure to them so that "the church may receive edification" (1 Cor. 14:5). Prophesying and speaking in tongues were both miraculous spiritual gifts employed to reveal the will of God to men (Acts 2:1-15; 2 Pet. 1:21). The tongue-speaking and prophecies were used, in the Corinthian assembly, for the same purpose (1 Cor. 14:12,22). How does this relate to us? Since Paul placed these activities in the framework of the assembly (14:12), gave them their purpose (14:3-5), and then urged the Corinthians to recognize that what he was revealing was the Lord's commandment (14:37), we thus recognize the declaration and hearing of God's will within the assembly as an authorized activity of congregational worship.

Praying

Next, Paul reveals that public prayer was an activity present within the worship of the New Testament church. Still in the framework of the assembled church (14:12), Paul mentions one of his conclusions is that prayer should be undertaken with “the spirit and... with the understanding” (14:15). The prayers were to be given in an understandable way, so that the others who were assembled could say, “Amen” (14:16). Prayer is another activity which Paul, under divine inspiration, put into the setting of the local assembly; thus, we should practice the same.

Singing

Fourth, in the same passage, Paul mentions another activity which is to occupy a place in public worship: singing. Much like prayer, singing is to be done “with the spirit and... with the understanding.” A point to be taken from this passage is that Paul mentions only singing. As Nadab and Abihu were to use no other fire than what the Lord specified, we as Christians should use no other means of worship than what the Lord has specified. If He has specified singing, we are under no more authority to pull in a piano or carry up a guitar as Nadab and Abihu were to gather fire from any other place. We must understand that, just as much as the Lord’s Supper is an act of worship which cannot be disregarded, the same can be said for singing. Assembled Christians who refuse to sing (14:12-15) violate the principle laid down by the Holy Spirit through Paul in this passage.

The Contribution

Finally, at the end of the first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul enjoins upon the New Testament church one final act of congregational worship- an individual contribution into a common treasury (16:1,2). Christians are, as an act of public worship, to contribute of their means. How do we know this was an activity to take place in the assembly? It was a command to churches (16:1). It was to take place upon the first day of the week (16:2; cf. Acts 20:7). Also, it was done in some sort of a public setting, to fulfill the command of Paul that “there be no collections when I come” (16:2b). Is there anything that

the church does upon the first day of the week in a public setting? Acts 20:7 tells us it is the day upon which Christians had a habit of coming together. A contribution from one's means upon the first day of the week is an act of worship, enjoined upon the individual, which is to take place in the public assembly.

Limitations

No study on this topic would be complete without taking a moment to recognize what, if any, limitations the Lord has placed upon these acts of worship taking place in the assembly. Both the collection and the Lord's Supper are limited with regard to the day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Also, Paul reveals a limitation with regard to leadership roles. Women, by Divine decree, are not permitted to hold leading roles when the church is assembled together (14:34; cf. 1 Tim. 2:11,12).

As mentioned earlier, there are some limitations to what Paul was talking about in 1 Cor. 14 regarding the declaration of God's will. While miraculous spiritual gifts such as prophecy and tongue-speaking were alive and well in the timeframe of 1 Corinthians, Paul mentioned in chapter 13 that a time was coming when all miraculous spiritual gifts would come to an end. The time when they would end, Paul revealed by inspiration, would be when "that which is perfect is come" (13:10). The coming of the complete revelation of God to man would see all miraculous spiritual gifts come to an end. Thus, miraculous spiritual gifts such as tongue-speaking and prophecy should not (cannot) occupy a place in our assemblies today. However, both miraculous gifts were used to put forth the will of God to man; such is accomplished today, not with miraculous gifts, but by a fair study of "the faith, which was once for all delivered" (Jude 3).

Conclusion

The question of how to worship God is a serious question. As Cain, Nadab, and Abihu reveal, God cannot be approached in a haphazard way; rather, individuals must sincerely seek out His desires and directives and obey them. God has spoken to us through His Word, the Bible; may He help us and guide as we seek to determine His will in all matters.