

Worship and Culture (Part 2)

New Testament Instructions

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When I last spoke about a month ago I gave five basic principles by which we can ascertain whether a practice is acceptable as worship. And I want to give those again in review of the last sermon to get a running start into this one.

I. Carnal man's instinctive response is to hide from God due to their sins.

By this what I mean is that carnal man's response to God is usually wrong. It is in us to run the other way; to do things in opposition to God. So, rather than humbly bowing down in obeisance and reverence, most people run, hide, disobey, or profane God or themselves in some way. It almost seems an instinctive, human, carnal reaction to just go away from God.

II. Only God can define proper, acceptable worship practices. Anything else is sin.

Remember that we went to the scripture there in Deuteronomy where it said not to add anything or take away anything from what He has instructed.

III. God is extremely interested in even the details of proper worship. He exacts penalties when we ignore the details. Remember that we went to the occasion where God told Moses how to make the incense; and how detailed the recipe was; and how God said to make sure that it is not used commonly by the people. This incense must be used for His worship only.

(He is very specific in His commands about how we should worship. And, we deviate from them at our peril.)

(This next one may be the most important one; and it summarizes all the others.)

IV. Our service and worship of God must meet certain very high standards.

Remember Who it is who we are worshipping—the Great God of all the Universe—He sets the standards. He sets standards that are usually so high that we must really strain to reach them. A bit more about that later.

V. New Testament Worship emphasizes inward reverence for God, and righteous obedience to His instructions.

This is in contrast to the Old Testament Worship which was strict adherence to ritual. But only a few who were called during the Old Testament period understood—David, Moses, and a few other prophets and kings—what true worship actually entails—what God is actually getting at. These are the men who talked about a soft heart, inward feelings of reverence toward God, and obedience to Him in every aspect, not just in the ritual practices.

So, in the New Testament one could say that form and ritual take a backseat to substance. But, this does not mean—I do not want you to take that too far—that we can be casual in our worship and do everything only internally and feel that it is enough.

Formality is still important to God, especially in our public worship because we are witnesses of Him, we have to show the highest regard for Him. Usually that is shown in rather formal and strict procedures.

Now, I ended that sermon with a hurried list of forms of worship found in the New Testament. They were just general categories.

1. Obedience to God.
2. Prayer
3. Singing and Praise
4. Preaching and Teaching
5. Good Works.

Now, in this list of five forms of worship Obedience to God and Good Works are primarily private and individual forms of worship. They are performed in the course of one's life everyday. They are not relegated to just a Sabbath service.

Prayer and Singing Praise are both private and public forms of worship, individual and corporate, depending upon the occasion. Of course, we know that prayer and praise in the form of prayer are things that we should do everyday. But, they have a special place in the worship service on the Sabbath. This is to explain what I mean by both public and private, individual and corporate. Just 20 minutes or so ago we participated in this public portion—when we sang hymns and participated in a corporate prayer. That is the sort of thing I am talking about here.

Preaching and Teaching is almost exclusively a public form. (Teaching, of course, is done in the home within the family, such as a family Bible study.) This is a form of worship and service to God unique in that it is primarily done by the ministry. It does include men in the congregation who give sermonettes and such so it is not exclusively ordained ministry.

Also of course, each individual has a responsibility to teach his children at home.

Do not get hung up on this that preaching is just a ministerial activity. But, normally it does fall to the ministry to do that in its bulk.

This finishes the summary of my previous sermon on this subject.

Although I introduced it, what I did not examine much last time, and the reason is that I was trying to lay groundwork, is the impact of culture upon worship—primarily public worship.

That is something I am going to get into today.

It is especially important for us to consider that now because the dominant culture in our own country, and throughout the world is becoming increasingly coarse, secular, and casual.

Most of you know that Protestant churches, primarily, often have two services every Sunday now. One is their traditional service where they use the usual liturgical form. And then it will be followed by a contemporary service which will have rock, or Christian-rock praise bands, a casual dress code—jeans, shorts, t-shirts—and various other things.

The service is normally much looser in script, and there is a lot of audience participation; whereas the traditional service tends to be more structured and have much less audience participation and does not have the back and forth between the speaker and the audience, like in a contemporary service.

Again, I want to look at the public worship service. As is my want, I am going to talk about principles, more or less, and what they did in the Bible. Then, we should be able to use our minds to determine whether something in our culture should be brought into the church as part of our worship.

I will tell you right now, the answer is probably no.

We need to consider whether our *Holy God* would want us to utilize such a lowly culture as ours in worship of Him. The culture we have today is crude, coarse, secular, and casual.

Would you use any of those terms to describe God? No.

Today, we are going to take a survey of the New Testament. And by this survey we will create a baseline for what is allowable in the church of God worship service, and worship in general. We will see from scripture what the 1st century church of God practiced. And by seeing what they practiced—what the Apostles approved in the churches—it will give us a good idea of the information we need to judge the impact of culture on church practices.

We will begin in Acts 1 just before the founding of the church of God, just after Christ's ascension. The first information that we have about how they worshipped comes right after this event. We will start in verse 12 and go through verse 14. This is just ten days before Pentecost, 31 AD.

Luke writes:

Acts 1:12 Then they [the disciples] returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey.

(That is about 5/8 of a mile, I think—a bit over a half-mile.)

Acts 1:13-14 And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James *the son* of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas *the son* of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

(The next verse says that there was about 120 names—maybe people, maybe families. Sometimes that word in Greek means surnames.)

Here we have a small group of people who comprised the church of God as this time, and there are a few things we should note about the way they worshipped together.

1) They were assembled together.

This is very important. Our worship should not be individual all the time. There are times when we should get together with the people who believe as we do. I think this is a blow against those who believe in being totally independent and want to do everything on their own. It is very important for the people of God to get together and worship together. It is not just for the fellowship, but also for the worship, assembling as God's people.

2) Men and women were assembled together.

There are some churches who segregate the men from the women. The Jews did this. Some (much later) professing Christians did this. But it seems rather clear to me from what we have in Acts 1 that the men and women were together as families.

3) It was a house where they were assembled together.

It was a house church. This tells us a couple of things: a) house churches are perfectly normal and right in the church of God. For those of you out there sitting in a living room for this service, there is nothing wrong with that. It is acceptable. I know that many people look down upon that, but we are just following in the footsteps of those who have gone before us. There is no need for a temple to worship in. There is no need for some official sanctuary or holy place. Remember that Jesus told the woman at the well that neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem will people worship. He meant that it would be worldwide, and that we could worship where we were. We do not have to go to a particular sanctuary to worship. It shows right here that they were very comfortable to have house churches. This is found throughout the whole New Testament—the church that was in Priscilla and Aquilla's house, etc.

This is perfectly normal and appropriate in the church of God.

4) They were united.

It says here that they were with one accord. They were in agreement. That is very important in a church. You cannot have a lot of factions not talking to one another. Pretty soon, it is not going to be a church. It is very important that there be like-mindedness within the congregation.

5) They prayed.

Prayer was part of their worship service.

That is pretty much all the detail that we can dig out of these three verses in terms of their worship practices.

But, it does not end in Acts 1, there is more. Let us go to Acts 2.

(We will be mostly in the book of Acts for about the first half of the sermon. It is here that we find the history of the early church, and it is recorded here the things that God wants us to follow.)

Acts 2:1 When the Day of Pentecost...

Pentecost is a holy day. So, this was proper holy day worship, which includes the Sabbath, too.

Acts 2:1 When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord [again] in one place.

Assembling in unity is mentioned again.

Acts 2:2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

They were in a house.

Acts 2:3-4 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

This was Peter's response to the crowd:

Acts 2:14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words.

(I will not get into the tongues question today. We had a sermon about this not too long ago. [Pentecost and Speaking in Tongues by John W. Ritenbaugh, May 30, 2004, Tape 669])

They were sitting together, in a house, in agreement. Prayer is not mentioned, although Acts 1:14 says they continued in prayer, so I would not be surprised at all while they were sitting there in that house is that they were praying because they had been told to wait there in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They knew it was going to be soon. They might have even figured out that Pentecost was when it would happen. I do not know. It does not seem that Peter was surprised.

It is also here that preaching is added. It was not just Peter. They spoke, it says, in other languages. Each person heard them in their own tongue. And they certainly heard God's Word being preached (in these other languages). They were preaching the Gospel much like Peter did.

So, preaching was also found to be part of the New Testament worship service.

Some would say that speaking in tongues is part of the New Testament worship service, but we know that this was a special occurrence. And, the only time in the New Testament, at least in the book of Acts, that it is shown as happening is when the Holy Spirit came upon a new group of people. Here it was the disciples, later in chapter 10 it is the Gentiles; and one more when the disciples of John were baptized. It was a sign that the holy spirit had come in power. This is not to be construed that speaking in tongues is a part of our worship service. As we know, speaking in tongues is speaking in another language. Paul shows later that there must be someone to interpret if the rest of the people do not speak that particular tongue.

Acts 2:40-47 And with many other words he [Peter] testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

This begins on the day of Pentecost and goes on into the following days and weeks.

On Pentecost, there were 3000 baptisms. So, we find that baptism and other ordinations are fine as part of our worship and service to God. This would also include blessings (like the blessing of little children), and anointings—Jesus certainly healed on the Sabbath day, and it would be just fine for us to do the same thing when we come together as a church.

And it says that they in the following days and weeks continued in the Apostles teachings. Compare this to chapter 1 where it talked about continuing in prayers. This is something that continued on. It did not stop. They were constantly learning and growing, and doing what the Apostles taught.

And they continued in fellowship. Fellowship is certainly good to do when we come together to worship.

Now, eating together is mentioned a couple of times. And, this is not mentioned in terms of worship, but in terms of fellowship. Eating is not necessarily a part of our worship. The exception is when we take the Passover on the Passover.

Good works are also illustrated here in that they had things in common, they gave to everyone who had need, and they helped one another.

And finally, praising God was shown to be part of their united daily worship activities. It says that they continued daily with one accord in the Temple, and then a bit later praising God and having favor with all the people.

So, we are seeing all these parts of worship coming through these examples.

Now, chapter 4. Remember I am taking a survey here. I am not trying to explain everything. I want you to see what the Bible says about their worship—the things that they did together.

Starting in verse 23, this was after Peter and John were arrested and questioned by the Sanhedrin, threatened, and then let go:

Acts 4:23-31 And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. So when they heard that, they [all the church there] raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: `Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the LORD and against His Christ.' "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

What I wanted to pick up here is that they participated in a corporate prayer. They with one

accord said this together. They made this prayer together to God. They could not have all come up with the same words at once. I am sure that what it means is that they were all in agreement with the prayer given by one particular person; or possibly one person added a thing, and another added something else. I suppose it was Peter and/or John leading the whole thing. I do not know that. All that we know is that they were together and all in agreement in this prayer to God (that they be able to speak now with boldness and do signs and wonders as a witness).

And God responded very quickly with an earthquake. The place was shaken. And what it showed was that it had God's seal of approval on their intent.

Notice, also, that within their prayer was Psalm 2: 1-2. This gives us approval to use the psalms in our corporate worship. They did not sing this, necessarily. They just included it in their prayer. Use of the psalms is perfectly alright. There is no stretch to extend the use of the psalms to singing and preaching.

This is a time when the Apostles had been taken captive:

Acts 5:40-42 And they [the Sanhedrin] agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Teaching and preaching, as well as rejoicing are specifically mentioned here. And, they are specifically mentioned as public activities of the church.

Acts 11: 26 is several years later. We are now in Antioch with Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 11:26 And when he [Barnabas] had found him [Saul], he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

I wanted to come to this one to show that preaching and teaching are obvious acts of the church in a public way. This was nothing new.

In Acts 13: 42, we are in Antioch again.

Acts 13:42 So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged [of Paul and Barnabas] that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath.

What we have here is Barnabas and Saul made it a habit to go to the synagogue on the

Sabbath and preach; and there were Gentiles there. These "God-fearers" were there also.

Acts 13:43-44 Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.

We have them preaching in a synagogue, on the Sabbath day, showing that the Sabbath is the proper day of Christian public, and communal worship.

Now, what most people do in reading through The Acts is that they do not catch the time movements.

This portion here in Acts 13 happened about 15 years after the Pentecost in chapter 2 (so about 46 AD or so). We are only 11 chapters onward, but 15 years, roughly, have passed. And Paul and Barnabas are still going to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and preaching there, and encouraging others to come the next Sabbaths thereafter to continue to hear the word of God.

So, we have here substantial evidence of the 7th day Sabbath is the proper day of Christian worship 15 years after the ascension of Jesus Christ and the founding of the church of God.

There is one more in this section in Acts 19:8-10. This is even further along in time. This is somewhere between 53 AD and 55 AD (according to my "inspired" margin). This is about 20 to 24 years after the founding of the church of God. Verse 8:

Acts 19:8-9 And he (Paul) went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.

Now why did I come here? This says the same basic thing that we just read in chapter 13. I came here to show you proof that this passage gives us implicit permission to use hired halls or meeting rooms for worship and preaching the truth.

They went to a school. Many churches of God have gone to a school and used their facilities. We have used theaters, Elks lodges, Moose lodges, and various other places. We used a Farmer's Union hall down in Columbia (SC). We do not have to have necessarily a specific worship place. There is no such thing as holy ground in a church. Not unless God is there, and then we would have to take off our shoes!

Where the church assembles for worship is not as important as their assembling for worship, and doing that under the proper instructions.

It says in another place that they went to the river because that is where people were gathering

to pray. For them, it was better to get out of town and go to a peaceful place, and they were taught there. That is where Lydia was called and baptized.

There is much more in Acts that I did not go through. I just went to places where there was something new to be added. Did you notice anything about these descriptions of early church worship practices, something that maybe struck you? I did. What strikes me is that they are very general!

Luke did not give much description about *how* they did things. He just tells us *what* they did, and a few cases of *when* they did it, and a few cases of *where* they did it. But, he does not give us a format. He does not tell us that they started with three songs, and then a prayer, and then a prophet speak, and then they had another song, and then they had some special music presented, and then one of the Apostles got up to speak, and then they had a closing hymn, and prayer. It does not say that in here.

It basically just tells us that they prayed when they came together, there was preaching, they did it on the Sabbath day, and they assembled at a certain place; and they rejoiced. They used the psalms, and I am sure the rest of the Old Testament. But, there was not a great deal of other detail.

The "nitty-gritty" was never gotten to.

This gives some leeway for using cultural forms or formats in our worship service. As long as they do not contravene the principles and high standards laid out in scripture. And that is why I gave the principles first so that we can understand that what we do and how we do it has to conform to those things. The rest that the Bible gives us, at least Acts, is very general.

And so we need to be very careful to conform our practices to the principles that were given.

Now in the first century the dominant culture among the early church was Jewish. The reason for that was because all of the Apostles were Jewish. Beyond that, the bulk of the 1st century church of God for a long time was Jewish also. And so, they used Jewish cultural forms. Those cultural forms come out in some of the things that are said in the New Testament.

We do not cotton to Jewish cultural forms in this country, usually. Some of us with a Jewish background are a bit more easy with those sorts of things, but most of us came out of Protestantism, or Catholicism in North America or Europe—non-Jewish Israelitish forms. They are different.

But that does not mean that the Jewish forms, because they used them in the 1st century church of God are better than these other forms. This only what the church started with.

The Bible does not give us a command anywhere that says "Thou shalt use Jewish forms of worship."

Jesus brought a better way, and it is incumbent upon us to make sure that the forms that we choose to worship God by are top notch.

This gives us a great deal of responsibility. We always need to remember Who we are worshipping. Our worship service is not for our benefit entirely. It is for our benefit. But its main—first—purpose is toward God. We have always got to remember that.

For example of some cultural forms that we might want to think about, let us go to Romans 16. This one is found in four other places in the Bible. Paul says in Romans 16:16

Romans 16:16 Greet one another with a holy kiss...

This is also said at the end of I Corinthians, II Corinthians, maybe II Thessalonians, and I Peter 5. Have you greeted anybody with a holy kiss lately?

This was a cultural practice. It was either Mediterranean, or Middle or Near Eastern. And if you want an example of a similar practice today, that would be what the French do when they greet one another. They give each other a peck on both cheeks. You will find many European cultures doing a similar thing.

This is how they greeted one another. It was simply a way of extending friendship—a hello. It was common, everyday normal. There was not anything sexual in it. It was just a way of greeting—a salutation.

And, in the 1st century church of God with the word 'holy' here, it is elevated somewhat to show brotherhood of the saints.

We do not use kisses like that today in America or Canada, or any of the other Joseph countries. We are more likely, among friends and fellow saints, to hug one another (to compare apples with apples, here).

Now, to some, a full body hug is far more intimate than a peck on the cheek.

When Dad and I went to France the first time, specifically the Boyer's home, we gave them hugs. We could tell that they were unfamiliar with it.

It was an American hug. Americans greet people differently than the French do. And they were a little bit resistant. Now we broke through that over time, we enjoyed teaching them to hug, but it was not purposeful in any way. We could tell that they were a little bit uncomfortable with it. It just was not a part of their culture. To them a peck on the cheek is far more platonic than a hug. A hug would be far more intimate.

And so our custom which we find to be acceptable, in most cases, could be taken as scandalous in a different culture. Some people do not touch one another that way even with their clothes on. So, we need to be careful.

And I would say that even here in America we should be careful about hugging one another, especially between the sexes, especially those full body bear hugs. They need to be done discreetly, and sparingly.

This is not because I am a standoffish German. That is not what I mean. It is not for want of affection. It is for propriety. So, think about it. This is a cultural form that has been accepted into the church of God, but is it up to the quality of God?

This is not a form of worship, but a form of fellowship—getting along with fellow saints.

Paul is telling about his early days in the church, and he says:

Galatians 2:9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

What we have mentioned here is a hand-shake. This is much, much better for greeting one another. We give a handshake as a token of fellowship, and trust, and friendship; as well as greeting.

This is a custom that seems to be widely accepted all over the world as a proper form of greeting.

(In some places in the Far East it is far more proper to bow than shake hands, especially in Japan where you would bow first.)

These examples are not forms of worship, but they are part of our fellowship on the Sabbath day. And it is these sort of things that we need to think about. If we stumble even in these little matters, what are the chances that we are going to stumble if we try to add some sort of other cultural thing to our normal worship of God? These little things are just between ourselves, or among ourselves; but when we add God to the picture our standards have to go up many-fold.

These customs illustrate how we have to think through these customs in order to determine if a practice is acceptable in our worship.

Many of you probably knew that we would have to end up in I Corinthians 11 and 14. These are important areas regarding worship.

I am going to read the first two verses here. Basically they introduce Paul's argument about hair length. There are head coverings here, and in most Bibles, but he is really talking about hair length.

We are not going to be distracted here by the hair length argument. I just want to get verses 1 and 2 which introduce it. Notice his opening salvo:

I Corinthians 11:1-2 Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered *them* to you.

That is as far as I want to go.

You might want to jot down II Thessalonians 2:15, and II Thessalonians 3:5 where Paul once again tells the Thessalonians this time to keep to the traditions that have been given by the Apostles.

I want to emphasize what Paul says here: Keep the traditions as the Apostles delivered them.

If you are an American, this might get your dander up. It might just be a little flicker (snap) in the mind. But, when somebody tells you to keep the tradition—to keep things as they have

been for a long time—Americans get the urge to fight.

Americans love to change and modernize things. They do not like to hold traditions. They like to, as their forefather did, whose name is Manasseh, which means, 'forget.' It is a family trait. It is a national trait. Manassites forget the past. And I think that Americans need to learn to remember the past in terms of tradition that the Apostles laid down.

What is the first thing we did when we came to this continent? We forgot Europe! We said, "We have had enough of them. We are going to start things new right here!"

And we did. Americans have a very short memory. We cannot even remember things just a few years ago. We will make the same mistake again because as a people, we forget—*purposefully*! This is not something that we got a part of our brain where things just slip into and then they are gone. It is not a general thing. It is an actual, family, genetic trait.

Joseph did not name his son Manasseh just by willy-nilly. It might be something that is with all of the Joseph tribes, because Joseph said that he wanted to forget everything that has happened to me before this time.

And then, he named his other son (Ephraim) "Prosperity" or "Adding." Joseph was a very forward looking person. Forgetting what was behind he wanted to go forward. It is a good spiritual principle in the right context. My Dad just read those scriptures in Philippians 3 (today's sermonette). But, in terms of traditions, we tend to lack something.

This is important.

Why does Paul say to the church of God to remember the traditions and keep them?

There are really good reasons for this.

First, they create unity, and they create order within the church. They also provide the best conditions for public worship, and instruction. These are the things learned through experience. And so the Apostles after experimenting with certain things came up with a format—an order, a way to do things—and they taught them to the churches.

Here we are in I Corinthians, the mid 50s AD, about the same time that he was in Ephesus, they had already had about 20 years of experience about what worked within a church service. So, he tells these Corinthians to remember to keep the things the Apostles taught you because they work.

So, they create unity and order within the church, and they provide the best conditions for public worship and instruction because they had experienced other forms that did not work.

In setting up a form of public worship for the church, an Apostle must first think of what? *God!* Honoring God! That is his first priority to put God *first* in the public worship service. We are His people, and we are there to worship and honor Him, and praise Him. That comes first.

So, whatever it common, crude, or profane is rejected out of hand as unworthy of exhibition before God.

So if anything is in any way common, crude, or profane, there is no thought of using them.

We have got to remember that we invite God to be among us and participate with us in our Sabbath services. It is usually part of the prayer that we ask God to be with us, and to inspire what goes on here.

And so we have to make sure on our end that the things that transpire in this service are worthy of His being here, and witnessing those things.

Remember what I said last time, that if we would not do something before our political leader here in our country, then we should not do it before God either. That is just a rule of thumb. And we should indeed go beyond that.

Now, the Apostle must also consider what would be best for the—notice the emphasis—spiritual well-being of the church. That would be his next priority—what would be best for the spiritual well-being of the flock?

Herbert Armstrong, when he was considering a format for the worship service, emphasized instruction through a lecture style sermonette, and a longer sermon.

Now, despite people's shrinking attention spans, these forms still work very well.

If anyone ever asks me—it happens more than you might think—changing the format of the service—my standard reply is (normally they want to shorten it): Do we, or our kids have any problem sitting through a two hour movie? If you can sit through a two hour movie, then you can sit through a two hour worship service.

And if your kids cannot do that, teach them to. You are not doing your job if they cannot sit through a two hour service. That is just flat out true. Get on the stick and teach your children to be good for two hours. Period.

Now, this brings me to another point that needs to be made.

People who desire change in the traditional service often use the "reason" that they "want to lighten the people's burden." (!) But they do not say the next part, "at the expense of decorum, or formality, and more importantly the depth of instruction that they receive, and most importantly, at the expense of God Himself."

Worship is our response to God.

It is a service that we are offering Him. That is why it is called a worship service. We are there to serve Him. And whenever an offering is given, whenever a service is done it entails sacrifice on our part.

We should do whatever it takes to please Him, and not we ourselves. We conform to God, not He to us. If you have not caught on, I am very much against changing our worship service—shortening it; making it "easier" on the people. And the reason is because of what it does in the long run.

The Bible contains several poignant examples in which decisions made to please the people end in absolute disaster: The Quail in the Wilderness—how many died there? Was it not more than 23,000 who died in one day?

Or, the First Attempt to enter the Promised Land—they got their tails beaten. Many died.

Or, Wanting a King—that took a while to progress into a disaster, but it ended in Israel and Judah going into captivity; high taxes, poor everywhere in the streets, and a very ruinous decline.

How about Saul's failure to obey God's command concerning Agag and the Amalekites? He lost his job! He lost his posterity's inheritance by failing to do what God said. He feared the people.

There is also a New Testament example, but it did not progress nearly as far.

I Corinthians 5 is slightly different than the ones that happened in the Old Testament, but it is the same principle.

I Corinthians 5:1 It is actually reported *that there is* sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife!

Now, listen to Paul's understanding of the situation.

I Corinthians 5:2-6 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Your glorying *is* not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

The reason I came here is because this was another example of the people getting together and making a very bad decision in order to be loving, tolerant, and forbearing (in a wrong way) concerning one of their own.

Their acceptance of this sin among them was affecting their formal worship before God. And Paul made them, as a congregation, publicly disfellowship this man. It says that! "When you get together deliver this man to Satan in the name of the Lord."

He shows that the Corinthians thought that they were being loving and helpful, and forbearing and tolerant in order to help this poor man. They were proudly bragging about it. That is what he meant when he said, "you are puffed up!" They boasted that they were being so loving, more loving than God. But in reality they were condoning perversion, and thus weakening their own character, and their own relationship with God Himself.

This is what I mean when I talk about adding or changing things about the way we function, normally it will not end up well.

This ended up better than might have been expected because the man repented. He was welcomed back into the church. But it could have been a lot worse.

My point is that decisions have consequences. And we should be very careful when making changes especially when our aim is to make it easier on the people, which is what I started this section with.

True Christianity is not easy. We enter the kingdom of God only through much tribulation, Paul says.

Usually making things easy and more tolerant of deviation starts a slide down the slippery slope to doctrinal delusion, and apostasy.

All it takes is one decision, and that opens up all the flood gates downstream. "Well, we did that, why cannot we do this? And if we did these two things, it only follows that we should do this..." And, pretty soon it has gone from little things like wearing a jacket to church (for you men), or some little thing that everyone should do, to, suddenly, worshipping a Trinity, or not keeping the Sabbath.

Do you know what started the deluge in The Worldwide Church of God? Little things like clapping after the special music.

And make-up, considered a big thing by some, but in the scheme of things, it is not as big—certainly not as big as the Sabbath, the Nature of God, the place of the Law, Grace, What is the True Gospel, etc.

It is little things that start the tumbleweed. Soon that tumbleweed picks up all the stray little bits here and there, growing huge by the winds of change blowing it around.

Do you know what it says in Proverbs 24: 21-22?

Proverbs 24:21-22 My son, fear the LORD and the king; Do not associate with those given to change; For their calamity will rise suddenly, And who knows the ruin those two can bring?

It says not to run with those who are given to change. It means do not associate with those people who like to agitate for changes here and there. Because, God the King will bring that person to destruction.

It says in Malachi 3

Malachi 3:6 For I *am* the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever.

He is not one of those who agitate for change.

The way of God has been the same since the very beginning. It has not changed. That is why

tradition in the church of God is very important. As long as it is the correct tradition, and the tradition, itself, follows the very principles found in the word of God, we should hold to it.

I Corinthians 11:16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor *do* the churches of God.

This is another thing that the people have lobbied for. I have pulled this a bit out of context. I want the principle. It is supported elsewhere in the Bible. I covered that in my sermon given November 20, 1999, "Debate: War with Words." People have wanted us to change our church service so that it is more like a give and take discussion—a round-table; or some sort of debate between a speaker and one or several in the audience.

You know that this comes from the world because the media and intelligentsia do this all the time. They are always in some sort of debate with somebody else about their ideas. That is a cultural thing that we should not bring into the church. It says right here in I Corinthians 11 that we have no such custom in the church of God of being contentious.

That is not what we do. The end portion of Titus will tell you that same sort of thing. "Avoid those kind of disputes."

If someone has a problem, he should bring it up privately to the minister, and not publicly in the church of God.

I purposely put the verse, I Corinthians 14, toward the end since I do not need to go into it in depth. I want to read it to you, though, starting in verse 23 because this is the longest and clearest section on how a church service should proceed. And, all we need to know here is the word "tongue" or "tongues" should be properly understood as "languages." And, that the word "prophesy" would be better translated as "preach."

I Corinthians 14:23-25 Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with [different] tongues, and there come in *those who are* uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy [preach], and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down *on his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.

Now if he gets proper instruction, Paul is saying, an unbelieving or uninformed person about what we do will become convinced. But, if we all babble about in different languages, people will think that we are crazy.

I Corinthians 14:26 How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue [language], has a revelation, has an interpretation...

He is not saying that we all have to have these things. All he is saying is that if you do, then that is fine.

I Corinthians 14:26 ...Let all things be done for edification.

We all come and sing psalms. Then, some of us are assigned to give edification—some sort of idea, teaching, revelation, or an interpretation of something—that is what we do! That is what is done in the sermon and sermonette. Some people prepare a psalm or song and give it as special music. This is what it means. Just make sure that everything is done for edification—big word. All it means is "building up." Make sure that it is encouraging, motivating, helpful—something that can help a person in his walk to the kingdom of God.

I Corinthians 14:27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, *let there be two or at the most three, each* in turn, and let one interpret.

Let us place a limit on these things. Let us not just have this long, drawn out service where people who know different languages all demand to be allowed to speak. No, he is saying let us just limit it to just two or three, and make sure that there is someone to interpret what they say. Very simple.

I Corinthians 14:28 But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God.

Do it privately.

I Corinthians 14:29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.

Listen and try to understand what is said.

I Corinthians 14:30 But if *anything* is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent.

If it is obvious that somebody is being inspired by God, then the person who is not quite so inspired, or is not prepared yet, he should be silent, and let the better prepared one speak.

I Corinthians 14:31-32 For you can all prophesy [preach] one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

Basically, somebody who will preach must be in control of what he is saying. He has to have everything down properly.

I Corinthians 14:33-34 For God is not *the author* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

Let your women keep silent in the churches [I Timothy 2:11], for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.

Or did the word of God come *originally* from you? Or *was it* you only that it reached? [Paul's sarcasm] If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant [at his own peril]. Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with [different] tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order.

Notice the principles.

I think that the church of God has pretty well in following Paul's instructions. Mr. Armstrong organized the service parts perhaps a bit more rigidly. There is not so much raising of the hand and "I have something to say." Mr. Armstrong was a much more formal person than that, but it is fundamentally similar. And we have followed what Mr. Armstrong has set down.

So, I have four principles that Paul brought out here.

1. Let all things be done for edification—for building up. If a person or a practice tears down, it is not good. The service is for instruction and encouragement, exhortation and correction.
2. The service should be peaceful and free from confusion. (I Corinthians 14:33 above).
3. Men are instructed to lead and participate formally in the service.
4. The activities of the service should be decent (or decorous) and orderly (verse 40 above).

Now these are the principles and guidelines we have to use in allowing or disallowing cultural practices into our public and private worship. Knowing the times of how close we are to the end, and the state of our culture, it is best, in my opinion, that we lean *heavily* toward the traditional, rather than the contemporary in order to please and honor the Great God in Heaven, and His Son, Jesus Christ.

I would like to read Revelation 5:11-14 in closing:

Revelation 5:11-14 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands

of thousands, saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!" And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!" Then the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.