



## Part 4 – The Church’s Gatherings

### Acts 2:42 – 47

What the Bible teaches about worship cannot be separated from what it teaches about the church. The worship of the New Testament church, like the worship of Israel (the Old Testament church), is a covenant renewal ceremony where God’s law and gospel are proclaimed, covenant rites are practiced (baptism and Lord’s Supper), prayers are offered, and praise is voiced. God is no less holy than he has ever been. Therefore, it makes sense that he

still cares about the manner in which he is to be worshiped. God is not like an idol so his people should not attempt to worship him in the ways in which the world serves its gods. The temptation toward aping the world’s forms of worship was a constant threat to the faithfulness of Israel.

The founding of the New Testament church was not, as J.I. Packer writes, “in any sense a breakaway from the past. On the contrary, Christ’s church was to be, and now is, nothing more nor less than the Old Testament covenant community itself, in a new and fulfilled form that God had planned for it from the start. It is Israel internationalized and globally extended in, through, and under the unifying dominion of Jesus, the divine Savior who is its King...In a word, the church is the community that lives in and by covenant communion between the triune God and itself” (*A Passion for Faithfulness*, xvi).

Surprisingly little about the structure of worship is changed by the New Testament. Certainly, the blood of sacrifices is no longer shed since Jesus, the Lamb of God shed his own blood for the forgiveness of God’s people once and for all. The Old Testament priesthood has been fulfilled by our eternal and abiding Great High Priest who intercedes for us at the right hand of Majesty. Therefore, instead of priests serving as mediators between God and his people, pastors serve the church by proclaiming God’s law and gospel. But in terms of the structure and elements of worship, the New Testament retains the importance of the corporate gathering, reading and preaching of God’s Word, covenant renewal rites, prayer, and praise. These have not changed and continue to make up the core of the church’s gatherings.

**Main Idea:** The church’s gatherings are for the purpose of worship which must be according to God’s own design.

### 1. The Ancient Pattern

- Two key moments in Israel’s history help set the pattern for the corporate gatherings of God’s people. Both events follow God’s gracious deliverance of his people from captivity. And both events establish elements which will be carried on in the church under the leadership of the apostles.

#### Exodus 24:3-11

- The gathering of God’s people at the foot of Mt. Sinai is the earliest recorded service of public worship in the Bible. It took place after God delivered his people from captivity in Egypt. At Sinai God gathered them to hear the reading of his moral law as revealed to Moses. Several things we must take note of:
  - **First**, after the law was read the people took vows to keep the Book of the Covenant (vs. 7).
  - **Second**, we note the rite of sprinkling the blood of a sacrifice. Half the blood was sprinkled on the altar and half upon the people. The symbolism of this act is powerful in that it points to the fact that the blood of sacrifice is what will unite these sinful people to their God.
  - **Third**, we notice the taking of the covenant meal on the top of the mountain. “They saw God and they ate and drank” (vs.11). The significance of this is the bond established between those who share a meal. Covenant meals are not uncommon in the Bible (Gen. 14:17-24; 18:1-15; Matt. 26:20-29).

#### Nehemiah 8:1-12

- After God set his people free from captivity in Babylon, they assembled in the now ruined city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah understood that a solemn gathering was necessary for their going forward (vv. 1-3). The similarities are striking between this sacred gathering and that at Sinai. The reading and preaching of God’s Word are central features. But there are also covenant rites such as the formal presentation of

the Book of the Covenant and the people's "Amen." Finally, the proclamation of the Word is followed by a feast presumably as a means to seal the unity of the covenant community.

- In the history of redemption, worship is far too important for God to have left its design up to us. The ancient pattern of worship established by God and which continues today is centered on God's verbal revelation of himself, his law, and his promises. Knowledge of God – which comes by way of God's Word – was and remains essential to worship that pleases God. For the Christian, intellectual apprehension of the true God will inevitably lead the whole person to worship God "in spirit and in truth." The more we know of God, the greater will be our capacity to love and worship him. Christian worship springs forth from both the intellect and the affections fully engaging both mind and heart.
- Any proper consideration of Christian worship must begin with the Old Testament. Beginning after the fall, worship was based on the promise that God would send a Messiah, the One who would provide a final solution to humanity's sin. Therefore, the biblical prescriptions for worship in the Old Testament were characterized by hope and by types and shadows pointing beyond themselves to Jesus Christ. The priests (intermediaries between the people and God) offered perpetual animal sacrifices in anticipation of the arrival of the once for all sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The corporate gatherings were based on what was at that time the geographical center of true worship, Jerusalem, with its temple. The people could not approach God directly. The mediation of priests and sacrifices was required.

## 2. The Christian Practice

Acts 2:42 – "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

- The first church continued the ancient pattern of those corporate gatherings instituted and designed by God:
  - a. Reading God's Word
  - b. Preaching God's Word
  - c. Sacraments (covenant rites)
  - d. Prayer
  - e. Praise
- We make a conscious effort in our corporate worship to be faithful to each of these elements. We describe it this way: In our corporate worship we 1) Read the Word, 2) Preach the Word, 3) See the Word, 4) Pray according to the Word, and 5) Sing according to the Word. In this way we hope to ensure that our corporate gatherings are not only pleasing to God, but the very thing that we need most as well.

## 3. The Continuing Priority

Hebrews 10:24-25 – "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

### a) Mutual Encouragement

- "And let us consider how to stir up one another...encouraging one another..." We sing, break bread, pray, and receive the Word together for our mutual edification. While we are to glorify God in all that we do as individuals, the emphasis in the Bible on worship is overwhelmingly on its corporate expression. We must never privatize what God calls us to practice in community. As the Day of Judgment approaches our need for the encouragement found in the church's gatherings is heightened.

### b) Self-Sacrifice

- The command for us to not forsake or "neglect" the church's corporate gatherings anticipates the fact that we will struggle to be faithful to those gatherings. The church's gatherings require a certain amount of self-sacrifice were we must lift our eyes from self and fix them on our brothers and sisters.

### c) Public Witness

- A commitment to the corporate gatherings of the church has never been more counter-cultural in American life as it is today. The simple act of getting up on Sunday mornings and attending the church's worship testifies to the fact that our hope is in Christ; that Jesus and time with his people is better than a day at the lake and more important than any soccer game.