

#### 4. *JESUS NEVER TAUGHT THAT WORSHIP WAS A LITURGICAL SERVICE*

Worship in the institutional church is most often understood to be an act of worship, a time of worship, or a service of worship in which various activities take place. Among these are congregational prayer, congregational singing, choral singing, reciting of creeds, scripture readings, pastoral prayers, liturgical movements and recitations, and times of meditation. These services usually take place in sanctuaries, church buildings, cathedrals, or rented public buildings, and they incorporate various objects such as altars, vestments, vessels, and symbolic objects of various kinds. Sometimes homes and outdoor locations are also used for worship services though these are almost always understood to be exceptions to the rule. The worship service is often a regular meeting on Sundays or on other religious holidays. Some worship services are also performed at funerals, dedications, weddings, and anniversaries.

The worship service has become a widespread concept. It has its main roots in two sources: The first is in the Jewish practice of offering sacrifices and recognizing days of remembrance such as the Passover. Many of the people, places, and things that accompany Jewish worship have also been incorporated into various forms of Christian worship services. These include the priest, the altar, and the sanctuary.

The second source of the practice of a worship service is the Greek world which in a sense represents the ultimate of the religious practices of non-Jewish peoples. The Greeks had religious systems that in many ways stole the show of the Jews. They had magnificent temples, hoards of priests, colorful processions, and ceremonies that often lasted for days and transformed whole cities into centers of celebration. These attention-getting practices strongly influenced the religion of the Roman Empire which ultimately formed the contours of the western political and religious world.

In many ways the Roman Catholic Church became the synthesis of all these influences—Jewish, Greek, and Roman. It took over the Jewish scriptures with its priests, vestments, hierarchy of leadership, and an understanding of the worship service as a bringing of a sacrifice. In addition, it took over the Jewish idea of being the protector of the Holy Land. The elevation of Rome to a holy city is also a copy of the role Jerusalem plays with the Jews.

Sanctuaries were often built on the top of Greek or Roman temples, secret mystery societies were founded, and religious processions were instituted on special days. The institution of the pope goes back to Etruscan influences that reach back to the days of the founding of Rome. Pilgrimages to holy places, another Catholic practice, were a part of the religious world of the Greeks and other peoples.

The result of these many influences and of centuries of worship history has caused the idea of worship as a distinct time of assembly and ritual to become one of the central characteristics of Christianity. A western “Christian” on the streets of any city in Russia, France, Italy, Sweden, the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and many cities in Africa, Asia, and Australia when hearing the word *worship*, will think of some form of action that involves going to a place of worship, being led by some official religious authority, and doing some specific liturgical acts. The worship service will have a beginning, a middle, an end, and afterwards all those who have participated will be under the impression that they have worshiped God.

All of these concepts of worship as a “service to be performed,” be they Jewish, Greek, Roman, Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant, have no roots in the Christian scriptures. Jesus Christ completely turned both the Jewish and Greek religious worlds upside down by teaching that his own death forever put to end the need for sacrifices made on an altar. He taught that the only true sanctuary is the body of a believer, that priests are no longer special intermediaries between God and man but the essence of every believer, and that worship is no longer a liturgy or a ceremony but daily obedience to the words of the Son of God.

### **Jesus had little to do with ceremony or religion**

Jesus Christ is actually one of the most unceremonious and nonreligious figures of history. Even atheistic communist leaders have instituted more acts of religiously colored ceremony than Jesus Christ ever did. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that Christ came to a culture inundated with religion and lived quite untouched by it all. He appeared to the religious of his day as an anti-religious radical. He openly criticized religious leaders and proclaimed them hypocrites; he went into the temple grounds of the Jews and created a scene by tipping over tables and herding the sacrificial animals out with a whip; he openly associated with individuals who were considered by Jews to be unbelievers and unclean; he disobeyed traditions of the Jewish elders; he was accused of blasphemy; he was counted among criminals and sentenced to death.

These observations about Christ are surprising but there is much more about him that prevents him from being associated with much that we think of as religion. Though Christ as the incarnate creator was therefore the world’s greatest creative genius and talent, he nevertheless refused to perform or parade his great gifts. His voice never

gave a concert. He left no artistic creations and trained no artists. He built no special buildings and instructed no followers to build them. He led no ceremonies, wore no uniform, choreographed no dance, led no liturgy, founded no artistic institutes. Even his miracles were never performed to attract an audience.

And though Christ was unsurpassed in his life and character, his closest students never erected a monument at his place of birth, never memorialized the times or places of his greatest works, never made pilgrimages to his home, never collected or displayed any of his possessions, never commissioned a portrait or a statue of his person, never instructed believers to attribute any value to the site of his crucifixion.

Jesus was only publically applauded once, and that on the back of a donkey. Shortly thereafter his death was demanded by the crowds. How different from the Son of God are many of the Christian traditions that have developed over the centuries. Worship services are often performances in which people receive adulation and applause; they take place in cathedrals, church buildings, and other elaborate structures; they are led by distinguished, trained, and talented individuals; they often showcase the talents of individuals; they include the display of monuments and images of Christ; they take place in localities that are the destinations of pilgrimages; they are carried out on special days with special objects, and by means of special liturgies.

All that is done even though none of it was the practice of Christ or his followers and though none of that was ever taught by Christ or any of those who wrote down his teachings. Jesus was simply not interested in things external. He was interested in things internal—the heart, the mind, the life. He was concerned about the way men responded to his words. Jesus defined his students as those who did what he said. He said his words were spirit and life. His last weeks on earth were spent making sure his closest followers understood his words.

This last point is actually a staggering demonstration of everything Christ stood for. The greatest object of holiness there ever was—the resurrected body of Christ—did not remain on earth as a triumphal proof for the presence and truth and power of God in the world. In his last days on earth Jesus showed himself only to a few hundred of his closest followers. He did not set off on a triumphal procession through the nations. He founded no great temple on a mountain top. Instead, he took the time of his last days to speak to his students about the Kingdom of God. Then, after making sure they understood his message completely, and after sending them to proclaim and teach his words, his body was taken from them. He left them not with his body but with his message. He gave them no physical remnants to cling to.

### **The tools of the Spirit**

Jesus sent his students equipped with the tools of the Spirit. He sent them to speak, to write, to teach, to remind, to rebuke, to encourage, to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to be scribes and prophets, to be workers in the word, and above all else to make men and women students of his teachings.

How different is the Christianity of today where few are interested in the actual texts of the teaching of Christ and his students. The words of contemporary speakers are preferred; the writings of contemporary authors are preferred; the significance of events, plans, visions, and ceremonies are preferred; the traditions of institutions are preferred; the doctrines of teachers are preferred; the impressions of circumstances are preferred; and the decrees of religious authorities are preferred.

Jesus put it this way to the religious leaders of the first-century: *You have invalidated the word of God for the sake of your own traditions.* Jesus described the religious society in which he lived as the blind leading the blind, and his words are as relevant for our age as they were for his. Just think how much wiser it would be to stick to the words which the writers of scripture actually wrote about Christ: all of those words; only those words; and taking all of them seriously and in context. Isn't it amazing that in our world such a simple and logical suggestion for following Christ—to merely take his words seriously—seems so radical and threatening?

### **A worship service sends a false message**

The idea of attending a worship service every now and then or even on a regular basis can never correspond to the example of Christ or any of his followers. This traditional idea of worship is not only a waste of time in terms of its relation to the purposes of God and the example of Christ, but it also sends a false message to the people who do attend worship services. It's saying to them that regardless of a person's relationship to Christ and regardless of the lack of obedience of a person toward Christ, you can still worship God simply by participating in a worship service. This is a huge deception. Worship is not something that can be turned on and off, and certainly not something that can simply be participated in.

People who believe that a worship service is true worship, and yet who are basically disobedient to Christ are being deceived to believe that all is in order in their lives. This is the curse of institutionalized religion. It's the deception that by simply participating in a few ceremonial acts and by taking part in some form of a corporate worship service, one is made to feel that God is placated and that one is in the will of God. People are led to believe that the key to being in God's will is to simply fulfill the minimum on "worship demands."

Paul described true worship best when he wrote the following to the believers in Rome:

Therefore, brothers, in view of God's mercies, I urge you to give your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. This is your sensible service of worship. Don't be conformed to the patterns of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern and approve what the will of God is—what is good and pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

### **The language, the actions, the place, and the people of the worship service**

Consider the words that are said in a worship service:

*Let us enter into the House of the Lord.  
Let us enter into the presence of the Lord.  
Lord, bless these words as they go forth.  
Let them be endowed with your power from on high.  
As you approach the altar of the Lord ...  
Join us now in the call to worship.  
Let us confess together our sins.  
Let us profess our faith.  
And now as we go from this place ...  
Lord, bless your servant as he speaks your words.  
Let us pray.  
Repeat after me.  
Please rise. Please be seated.*

Consider the things that are done:

*Bells are rung  
Candles are lit  
Worshippers are seated  
Authorized people preside  
Holy days are celebrated  
Vestments are worn  
Silences are observed  
Rituals are performed  
Ceremonies are performed  
Musical presentations are performed  
Sacraments are performed  
Signs are given*

Consider the place:

*A sanctuary with an altar*  
*Symbols and pictures in the room and on the walls*  
*A stage or altar with an audience area*

Consider the people involved:

*Worship leader*  
*Audience*  
*Pastor, priest, religious mediator of some sort*  
*Processional, choral, instrumental participants*

None of these phrases, actions, set-ups, or people are ever recorded a single time in a worship context in the Christian scriptures. All of them, however, are quite normal concepts among the many religions of the world. It is interesting that though Jesus or one of his students would feel quite out of place in a worship service today, a priest in one of the Greek temples in Ephesus or Corinth would feel quite at home.

None of this was taught by Christ as something his followers should do. Quite the opposite. His words and example do away with all such thinking about approaching and worshipping God. He himself is God who approaches us, who desires to live with us, and who is honored when we listen to him and do his will daily.

He came as the high priest and makes each believer a priest. He offered himself as the Lamb of God and forever did away with the need for another sacrificial lamb or altar. He makes each believer and all believers into his holy temple. He is honored (worshiped) when his followers listen to him and do what he says. He loves the prayer of each individual who seeks to be alone with him. He and his students were the example of how believers should be with one another; what their concerns should be; what their attitudes should be; what their goals should be; and how they should work with one another.

He is pleased when his followers are humble and have no desire for worldly prestige, when they are generous and have no desire for worldly possessions, and when they are strong in him and have no desire for worldly pleasures. He is pleased when his followers determine to be students who learn his words to do them, and whose goal in life is to help others come to Christ and become students of his words.

### **The cost of the worship service**

In order to present worship services week after week and year after year, churches the world over spend millions of dollars and invest millions of hours. The industry of

religious worship services easily outspends the weekly expenditures of the largest corporations in the world. This is only possible because the religion of Christianity presides over unimaginable riches and wields great power. The net worth of individual church organizations such as the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Orthodox Church, the Lutheran Church, the Methodist Church, or the Mormon Church dwarf those of the world's largest business organizations. Religion is truly big business.

### **The exaggerated role played by music today**

Music plays a huge role in Christianity today. In many ways it has become the central component of what people understand worship to be. As such it is often a key ingredient of what is typically understood as the "moving of the spirit." Listeners are transported to the heavenlies when the rhythm is rolling, the beat is pulsating, and the singers are warming up to their task.

Music has become so prevalent on the religious scene that in many churches musicians have increasingly been given the title of worship leaders. Talented musicians are often even understood to be spiritually gifted individuals who enjoy the admiration (adoration?) of those "to whom they minister."

It can also be observed that certain kinds of spiritual music have taken on a measure of holiness in their own right. This is even true to the extent that it becomes irrelevant who performs the music. Thus, it makes no difference to most listeners if a particular song is sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, a rock group, a pop singer, or a secular celebrity. Regardless of the musicians, listeners of many stripes will reverently allow the music to emotionally carry them along. In other words, spiritual music functions like a badge of merit that lends its credentials to any musician willing to do it justice.

### **Why music is so prominent in the fabric of Christianity**

Music is entertaining; it gives pleasure; and, like a drug, it can provide relief from the toils of the day. Today, the expanding world of electronic media has made this drug available to people on a twenty-four hour basis. Music dependency has become a sign of the times.

The psychological and cultural aspects of music, however, are only a partial answer to the influence of music in the world of Christianity. The deeper explanation is found in the fact that music, when it is done well, can make an audience pliable. Music is a gentle crowbar that can move human feelings. It is a channel to human emotion, and emotion is often a more powerful influence on people than logic or faith. This explains why music figures prominently in most spiritual events.

### **Music does not play a big role in the Christian scriptures**

Though people often point to passages in the scriptures that refer to songs or singing, these are usually taken out of context and do not support many of the musical practices of today. One verse that is mentioned more than any other is Colossians 3:16:

3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with grace in your hearts to God.

This statement, even considered in isolation, says something quite different about music than that which is normally practiced in most Christian groups. It's important to note that this entire verse is based on an injunction that is seldom true of those who call themselves Christians—to have a full understanding of the word of Christ and an active involvement in wisely using this understanding in the lives of others. This is not the picture of what is taking place when people get together at a Christian event involving music. Now observe this verse in its immediate context:

Most group-singing today is an example of non-personal communication, and concert-style music is even more so. It should be noted that the singing mentioned in Colossians 3:16 is intensely personal. It is not necessarily even audible. It is singing that takes place in the heart and is principally directed to God.

3:12 Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, 3:13 bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if someone happens to have a complaint against anyone else. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also forgive others. 3:14 And to all these virtues add love, which is the perfect bond. 3:15 Let the peace of Christ be in control in your heart (for you were in fact called as one body to this peace), and be thankful. 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with grace in your hearts to God. 3:17 And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Here we observe a context of daily living and daily attitude that has nothing to do with “event Christianity.” There is nothing in this context or the larger context that surrounds this portion of the letter that would lead anyone to believe that the author is suggesting the readers attend Christian concerts or that they engage talented musicians to aid them in their singing. The fact is that the singing in view here is an attitude of a believer who is well equipped in all the instructions of the Lord and desirous to be an example of peace, thankfulness, forgiveness, and wisdom. There is no indication that a music industry is being called into play here. There is no undergirding of music

as a virtue in and of itself. In other words, there is no support here for the powerful music traditions that permeate much of cultural Christianity.

### **There are no examples in the scriptures of music ministries**

Consider once again the two prominent groups of believers in the Christian scriptures that are held up as examples for us to follow: The first consists of Jesus Christ with his closest students, and the second focuses on the one-time Pharisee, Paul, with his students. Neither of these groups of believers can be observed arranging for musical accompaniment. Nor can they be observed recruiting talented musicians, exalting or praising any musical performances, or giving music any crucial role in their lives or their teachings.

Does this mean that these men were against singing? Of course not. Singing is as natural as walking or talking. Both Christ and Paul are recorded as having sung. Paul even did it in prison. These comments in the scriptures, however, are not given any emphasis. The fact is that the scriptures do not give music the place that it is given in most Christian cultures. Like most traditions, today's musical practices—be they contemporary, classical, or liturgical—are by no means scripturally supported. And like most traditions, they push themselves to the forefront, take on the authority of scripture, and relegate the teachings and example of Christ to a place of insignificance.

Music has become so important in the church life or the spiritual life of most people that talented musicians have become prominent individuals in many circles, large outlays of funds have been made to promote ongoing music programs, music has become an indispensable ingredient for many events, and musical presentations are often described as being blessings or evidences of the presence of the Spirit of God.

None of this is consistent with the life or the teaching of Christ or any of his students. Music figured into their lives but in no greater way than did walking, building, planting, or fishing. To turn any of these tasks into particularly spiritual activities would be tantamount to what has taken place with music over the centuries.

All of this ultimately contributes to a trivializing of the message of Christ and the person of Christ. Worship has nothing to do with the quality of music during a service. It has everything to do with obedience to the instructions and example of Christ. Talented musicians are no more spiritually gifted than are talented cooks, athletes, painters, or car mechanics. Musicians have become the people who love to be seen and love to be admired. They are the evidence that a worldly Hollywood atmosphere has come to dominate people's understanding of worship.

### The performer in Christianity

Christ once told his students that they should not be like the hypocrites who like to be seen doing things as intimate as prayer. Jesus didn't want them parading their piety. Though a simple instruction about modesty and genuineness, it may be one of the most blatantly ignored instructions in a Christianity whose leaders often project highly visible presentations of themselves and their practices. It all begins with a backdrop of architecture, a collection of symbols, (towers, crosses, stained glass, over-dimensional structures, statuary, artwork, altars, tapestries, relics, and various smaller objects such as bells, candlesticks, vases, and chalices), a selection of practices designed for overt display such as ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations, and often includes vestments such as collars, robes, jewelry, and headpieces of various degrees of ornamentation.

In days gone by the efforts of religious people to display their devotion through magnificent temples and spectacular ceremonies stood in stark contrast to the surrounding population which often lived in mundane and impoverished circumstances. Theoretically, in such a situation, it would have been easier for a follower of Christ to recognize the impropriety of such practices.

Today, however, we live in a world in which it is considered quite normal to place oneself in a spotlight. From the sports field to the political arena, many people find it quite natural to draw attention to themselves. It's an entertainment world in which popularity and praise are considered worthy goals. Mass acknowledgment is equated with success. In this world of heightened bravado, the efforts of the institutions and organizations of Christianity to capture the spotlight have been taken to new heights.

The winners in this popularity-oriented society are the good-looking and the talented. They have what it takes to make a splash, and this entertainment-driven bug has found its way into traditional Christianity in the way of the charismatic speaker and the charismatic singer. Both are entertaining; both are popular; both are attractions that draw people; both have become role models for the youth who observe them and look up to them.

In fact, it has become standard procedure today to consider both the talented speaker and the talented singer to be *spiritually* gifted individuals. There is thought to be power behind their words simply because they can captivate an audience through their rhetorical and musical skills. They are capable of "working audiences," as a professional entertainer might say. They make people laugh or cry; they don't just sing or speak but they perform on stage; they make an impression on people; they motivate people; they garner the adulation and applause of people.

There is nothing in the scriptures to indicate that good looks or talent are reasons for thinking a person to be godly in any way. And there is nothing in the behavior of Christ or any of his students that indicates it is important to be able to work a crowd. The opposite is the case. The presence of crowds was not seen as positive in terms of the communicative opportunities it offered. The crowds were fickle and easily moved to some sort of unthinking actions. Never did Christ or his men ever practice ways to entertain a crowd or to draw a crowd.

Jesus is not depicted in the scriptures seeking out the good singers or good speakers among his students; there were no indications from him that the exercise of any talents would somehow make people more receptive to his message; he didn't encourage his students to work on their singing or speaking abilities; among Jesus and his students we hear of no performances being practiced; there is no record of Jesus praising someone for their beautiful voice or their powerful speech; there's no mention that he ever dressed to make an impression.

Jesus Christ, the living Son of God and creator of the universe, was most likely the most talented person to ever walk the face of the earth. In view of this, it's remarkable that he didn't seem to think these talents were worth highlighting. As far as we know he gave no concerts, competed in no athletic events, and made no effort in any way to impress the people around him.

He also didn't appear to pander to the talented and the famous. The opposite seems to be the case. All of his closest students, for example, were Galileans, a strain of people looked down on by Judean Jews in the first century. Even among the Galileans, Jesus' men were not an impressive group. Among them, we never hear that there were any Rabbis, actors, generals, artists, aristocrats, priests, or athletes. We read that they were a few fishermen, a tax collector, and several others who were never given a label by the scripture writers.

How different are the attitudes in our world in which talent and popularity are often the hallmarks of leadership and success. The institutions of Christianity also often follow the world's lead by equating talent with spiritual giftedness, by hailing the performances of the talented as works of the Spirit of God, and by punctuating religious ceremonies with the recognition of prominent individuals and with the entertainment provided by well-known artists.

Jesus had different priorities. Rather than trying to attract people by talent or entertainment, he chose instead to test them for authentic faith. He was not interested in something that could be conjured up with superficial tricks. He taught that faith was a heart issue. It can only be measured by its response to adversity. Faith does not ride on the crest of feelings produced by an entertaining evening.