

# Straight Bible Talk

Manchester Church of Christ, Share Christ's Love and Share His Message

## Worship or Entertainment?

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At the heart of what every church does is that hour on Sunday morning when they gather together in a common assembly to worship God. What happens in that hour is as different as the beliefs of those who gather.

Shall we do "high church" or "low church?" Shall we have a "contemporary service" or a traditional service?" Shall we do a group participation event or shall we leave all to a single leader who does everything himself (or herself)? Shall we be quiet or noisy? Shall we do it in 30 minutes or do we need to extend it for hours? Shall we dress up for the occasion or shall we come in casual attire? Shall we commit the leadership of the worship to men only or shall we incorporate women into leadership roles as well?

Every option above has its enthusiastic supporters. And, equally, every option has those who vehemently protest. And there are those who would simply say, "Different strokes for different folks," as though what is done in worship is simply "local preference."

I grew up going to a church which had a quite different tradition for worship than where I attend now. It was not without misgivings that I accepted a change. My change was not driven by "worship styles" it was more a matter of being with my family than personal convictions. But I know the feeling of going to church and thinking that something was missing because the worship was different than that to which I was accustomed.

I would have been among those, at that

time, who would have said, "What difference does it make? You do what you like and I will do what I like."

I would have also had to confess that I had no idea what worship was really about. I remember going to church as a child and I had these scratchy, wool pants that my mother made me wear. I hated church because I could not stand those pants.

Perhaps for some people, worshipping God is a lot like buying presents for Christmas. You know, there is that ugly orange tie that someone gave you. For me, it was a pair of orange socks. What in the world do you have that you can wear with orange socks? (Orange pants, maybe.)

Anyway, people seem to figure that as long as they got you something, you ought to be happy. You dare not let them know what a disaster their gift really was. So, you keep your mouth shut, smile, mumble thanks, maybe even make up some story about how much you appreciate the gift, grit your teeth and bear it.

Because we can get away with that sort of gift, some people seem to think that we can get away with that kind of worship. Like spending a few bucks, we try to get by as cheaply as possible, and offer some kind of worship to God. It is assumed that God will accept whatever we offer.

Or, perhaps it is like the fellow who tried to figure out what to get his wife for her birthday. Since he loved golf, he decided

Editor/Writer – Steve Bastin  
E-mail – mancchrist@snet.net  
manchesterchurchofchrist.org

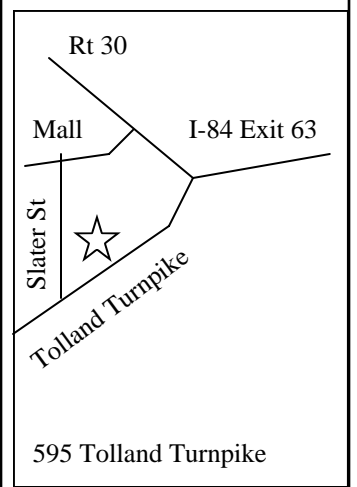
Manchester  
Church of Christ

Meeting at  
595 Tolland Turnpike  
Sun Bible Classes—9 AM  
Sun Worship—10 AM  
Sun Eve Worship—6:00 PM  
Wed Bible Class—7:00 PM

"For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Hebrews 10:30-31

All scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.



to get his wife a new set of golf clubs as a gift. It never occurred to him that her horrid dislike for golf might affect her feelings about the gift! It seems not to occur to many people that there may be things that God wants in worship and things that God does not want.

If there are no standards that determine what is acceptable worship, then perhaps all of the above is perfectly all right. If there is no list of what can and cannot be done in worship then we would seem to be free to do as little as possible or we could choose whatever it is that pleases us in worship. (That definitely eliminates the scratchy pants.)

### **Moving Away from the Bible**

As we move through the 21st century there are many churches moving further and further from the Bible. As bit by bit churches chip away at the moral demands of the Bible it is not strange that they would move further and further from any sort of worship that is based on the Bible.

There are plenty of reasons for believing the Bible is the Word of God, not the words of men. Written by men, yes. Inspired by God, definitely. Just take for example the many prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament. If they did not come from God, I am at a loss to explain how so many people, writing hundreds of years before Jesus, were able to know the details of his birth, his life, his death and his resurrection. Yes, all of that is in the Old Testament. And Jesus explained these scriptures to his disciples after his resurrection.

We are part of a “Back to the Bible” movement. We believe that the Bible is God’s Word and that it has been given to us to direct our lives. We firmly believe that the Bible is God’s standard for worship as well as for morals!

### **God Rejected Cain’s Worship**

The Bible tells of the time when Cain and Abel (sons of Adam and Eve) brought sacrifices to the Lord. God accepted Abel’s sacrifice and rejected Cain’s. What! Do you mean that it is possible that God does not like what someone does in worship? Sounds like that to me. Maybe you want to put a different spin on the event. (You can read this in Genesis, chapter 4.) Maybe Cain had muddy shoes or something else ridiculous. All that we know from what God tells us about these two young men is that one sacrifice was accepted and one was rejected.

This is not the only example, in the Bible, of God rejecting someone’s worship. Jesus told a woman of Samaria that they were worshipping “what you do not know.” Later, he told her that acceptable worship is “in spirit and in truth.” That sounds very much as though God expects us to know what we are doing in worship. The Samaritans did not. The Jews did. And the issue in that case was just about the proper place to worship. Jesus did not even get into what they were doing and whether that was acceptable or not.

### **Moses Instructs Israel’s Worship**

When Moses gave God’s law to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, a great deal of attention was focused on the worship that God expected. There was a special group of people responsible for directing that worship (the priests). There was a particular place where that worship had to be offered (the tabernacle, a tent). There were particular offerings to be brought (some animals were acceptable, some were not). In page after page in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God laid out what He expected in the worship of His people. (Even the incense was carefully controlled in its mixture, place of burning, who could offer it, where to get the fire to burn it. And the instruments were used by command of God as well, two trumpets. Even their manufacture was by the command of God. It required a new revelation to David to add additional instruments and a choir at the temple.)

Unacceptable worship in the Old Testament sometimes resulted in death to the worshipper. At other times it brought the wrath of God in pestilence, drought and invasion from neighboring countries. Paul said that the things that happened to Israel were written to admonish Christians. He even told one church that some were sick and others dead because they had failed to properly observe communion (see 1 Corinthians, chapter 11). (I wonder what God thought about me fidgeting in my scratchy pants.)

In the Old Testament, worship meant a trip to Jerusalem three times a year. It meant setting aside a tenth of one’s income for the trip and its resulting costs. It meant three weeks in Jerusalem plus the time spent in traveling there and back. Some people claim that certain things are okay in worship because they did them in the Old Testament. Well, if you are going to go by the Old Testament for your standard in worship, then, “See you in Jerusalem.” If you are going to treat the Bible like a buffet where you choose what you want and reject what you do not want, then, “See you in . . .”

When Jesus spoke to the woman in Samaria about the place of worship he told her that the time was coming when the place would not matter. The place would not matter because God was about to change the covenant. God set forth in the New Covenant the things that mattered in worship.

### **The Christian Altar in Heaven**

Instead of animal sacrifices every day, in the New Testament, Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. There is no longer a need for an animal sacrifice if you accept the sacrifice of Jesus for your sins. Since there is no sacrificial system, the early Christians had no altar in their places of worship.

In the Old Testament, the altar stood outside the tabernacle (later, after Solomon built the temple, it stood outside the temple). For Christians, the altar is in heaven. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus “did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.” While Jesus died on the cross at Golgotha, his blood was offered in heaven “once to bear the sins of many.” Since there are no more sacrifices to be offered, there is no need of an altar on which to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice. Churches that have an altar must appeal to the Old Covenant as justification for their practice, a Covenant that was fulfilled and made obsolete by the sacrifice of Jesus.

### **Incense, Candles and Robes**

What was said about the altar applies equally to burning incense, lighting candles, playing instruments of music and wearing robes in Christian worship. They had no place in worship for those early Christians. While such practices could be seen daily at the temple, Christians were not worshipping at the temple. Their worship took place in homes, schools and other places of convenience with no fixed place of worship such as is common today.

The whole idea of a special category of “priests” as the only ones qualified to lead Christians in worship has no place in the New Testament. Certainly there was such a class in the Old Testament. Priesthood was hereditary in the Old Testament. Descendants of Aaron were the only ones allowed to officiate in the tabernacle and, later, at the temple.

The whole idea of “clergy” and “laity” is derived from the Old Testament law of the priesthood. It does not come from Jesus, nor his apostles nor from anything written in the New Testament. It contradicts the idea expressed in Peter’s letter that states that Christians are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” In the New Testament there are no restrictions on which men may baptize, preach, serve communion or otherwise lead a congregation in worship. Restricting such activities to those who have been “ordained” by some group of “church officials,” (also unknown in the New Testament) represents a departure from God’s simple plan for His church.

### **Pianos, Organs and Drums**

For the first several hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers simply sang their praises to God. Even as late as the 19th century, most Protestant religious groups were using only vocal music in worship. That changed in the mid 1800’s as more and more groups turned to instrumental accompaniment and then solos for featured instruments. While many prominent religious leaders cried out against the modern innovations, they were drowned out in the fervor of those who

wanted the instrumental music. A common argument went thus: “Where does God say we cannot do this?” For those who had already brought in altars, incense, candles, robes, choirs and such, the argument was overwhelming. For if the instrumental music could not be brought in then what were they to do with all of the other things that had been brought in from the Old Testament.

There are numerous references, scattered through the New Testament letters, that tell of the early disciples of Jesus singing “psalms, hymns and spiritual song.” No one questions the fact that those first Christians were singing together to give honor and praise to God. Several passages in the New Testament are thought to be from those early Christian hymns.

### **Communion**

Some churches have communion every day, some once a week, some once a month, some quarterly (every three months), some annually and some never. Does it matter?

It only matters if one takes seriously what is found in the Bible. Otherwise nothing matters as long as the group is comfortable with what is being done in their fellowship.

There is no question that Jesus commanded communion. The words, “Do this in remembrance of me,” are a command. Jesus said it. That settles the matter.

There is also no question from references in Acts and 1 Corinthians that Christians had communion on Sunday. There is also no reference to communion on any other day of the week after Jesus was raised from the dead. So, the only reference we have to disciples obeying the command of Jesus was on Sunday. If we truly do this to remember Jesus, then how can one depart from the practice of those upon whom the church is said to be founded, Jesus and his apostles?

### **True Worship Honors God**

Since ancient times, men have given homage to kings and lords. On bended knees they have approached those who held their lives in their hands. Thoughts were focused on the dignity and majesty of the one who reigned over them. Their personal comfort was of no consideration in the presence of the powerful one to whom they came to give his due.

We have long since ceased to give such honors to living beings. Except in the presence of the President, it is not uncommon to call our chief executive all sorts of vile names. Authorities of all kinds are commonly lampooned in the press and on television. There exists no sense of a powerful being to whom one must give

answer.

All of this change in thinking has had a sweeping change upon how people perceive worship. It is no longer an awesome God who is worshipped, even though the words of the song suggest otherwise. For many, God is more of a servant than a master.

Some common complaints go thus: "I didn't get anything out of worship today." "Worship is boring." "Why should I go to worship when I leave feeling worse than when I came?" All of which misses the point of what worship is supposed to be.

Worship is the adoration of a created being offered to its Creator. It is bowing down in the presence of the Almighty. It is an offering to One from whom all blessings flow. It is an admission of weakness in the presence of Power.

The very idea that the worshipper should decide in what worship should consist is a mockery. The question, "why can I not do this in worship?" tragically misses the point of what must be in worship.

Cain's worship was rejected. Later, two priests, Nadab and Abihu, were killed by fire from God because they offered "strange fire which God had not commanded." David's servant, Uzzah, was killed for his irreverence

in touching the ark of God, the symbol of God's presence in Israel. Earlier over 50,000 had been slain for presuming to simply look inside the ark of the covenant.

### New Testament Worship

From the beginning of the church, worship among the followers of Jesus was simple. Their first gatherings had them listening as the apostles explained the teachings of Jesus and his kingdom. On Sundays they celebrated the death and resurrection of Jesus in breaking bread, as Jesus had done on the night in which he was betrayed.

Prayer was also an important part of those early meetings. Sometimes prayers were offered for courage as they face the increased anger of the Jewish leaders. The prayers were not memorized repetitions, but expressive of their needs and their heart-felt love for God.

Contributions were taken in order to meet the needs of those who were hungry or otherwise suffering. Those collections were voluntary as the Old Testament system of tithing had been set aside leaving only the free-will offerings that had always been a part of the response of God's people.

Singing became a part of what those

Christians did in their assemblies. Paul and Silas sang hymns of praise to God in the jail at Philippi. The Christians at Corinth were admonished "to sing with the spirit and with the understanding." Some had apparently decided that singing in strange languages was an improvement and Paul rebuked such thinking. He told them understanding was essential.

### Catering to the World

There will always be the temptation to change the simple form of New Testament worship. In the drive to build large churches, truth is often set aside in order to appeal to ever larger numbers of people.

Worship is changed, from an offering to God, to an offering to the worshipper. People are entertained and made to think that God is pleased because they are pleased.

The latest and best in technology is brought into use to make the appeal of worship as broad as possible. People flock to see the latest performance and consider themselves as servants of God when in reality all that has been served is people.

God seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. Always has. Always will.

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- Please send me a free copy of the book, "A Christian Survival Manual"
- Please add my name to receive "Straight Bible Talk" free each month
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Manchester Church of Christ  
595 Tolland Turnpike  
Manchester, CT 06042

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Send requests/questions to: Manchester Church of Christ, 595 Tolland Turnpike, Manchester, CT 06042 or call, 860-646-2903. 4/07