

# Worship in the Early Church



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 1:1–11, 2:14–41, 17:15–34, 18:1–16, 1 Corinthians 13.*

**Memory Text:** “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (*1 Corinthians 13:1, NIV*).

Soon after Christ returned to heaven, the early church began to expand and grow. At first, it almost was exclusively Jews who were accepting Jesus as the Messiah and coming into the ranks of believers. Indeed, at first, many of the believers thought that the gospel was only for the Jews, which showed how much they still had to learn.

At Pentecost, after Peter's preaching and altar call before a multitude of Jews (*Acts 2*), “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (*Acts 2:41*). This text alone shows the fallacy of the idea that all the Jews rejected Jesus.

Yet, we would be mistaken to look back on the early church as some sort of idyllic time of worship and praise. Though in a radically different context, the early church struggled with some of the same issues we struggle with today, issues that could and would impact everything about their faith, including worship.

This week we will take a look at a few instances from the early days of Christianity and some of the challenges the church faced as it grew, and we'll seek to learn from the good things and, also, from the bad.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 17.*

## Many “Proofs”

From a human perspective, Jesus’ earthly ministry did not look so successful. Though He had attracted a fairly popular following while alive, it did not catch on en masse. Many leaders rejected Him, and of course, the Romans crucified Him, causing His closest disciples to scatter and flee.

Things looked pretty bad until His resurrection and then Pentecost, when suddenly His followers found a new boldness to proclaim their crucified Master as the Messiah of Israel. It was only after the resurrection of Jesus, in fact, that the early church started to take off.

**Read** Acts 1:1–11. What important truths do we find here about the Second Coming, baptism, the Holy Spirit, and mission?

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**Look** especially at verses 3 and 6. What do they tell us about how much more truth the disciples had to learn?

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One of the most interesting parts of this section is verse 3, in which Luke states that Jesus presented them with many “proofs.” Some versions use the phrase “infallible proofs,” which is somewhat overstating the case. Another translation calls it “convincing proofs,” which is the less problematic translation. The point here is that the believers in Jesus were given powerful evidence, “proof” of Jesus as the Messiah. Considering the daunting task that He had called them to and all the opposition that they would face, they needed all the proof they could get. The good news is that the Lord will give us all the reasons we need for faith, all the reasons we need to believe in things that we do not fully understand. As we see in these texts, the disciples still did not fully understand the Lord’s intentions regarding the nation of Israel, even after all this time with Jesus. We need to learn to worship, praise, and obey the Lord, despite all that we do not understand.

**Think about the powerful evidence we have for our beliefs, on all the good reasons for the logic of our faith. Notice, too, the use of the word *faith*. What does faith imply? That is, what good reasons do you have for having faith, a belief in something that you do not fully understand?**

## The Preaching of the Word

A great part of the Protestant worship tradition has been the preaching of the Word. A sacred responsibility falls upon the one given the task to feed the sheep, to teach and to preach and to exhort and to encourage. Music, liturgy, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and foot washing all have their place, but, perhaps, nothing's more important than what is preached from the pulpit during the worship hour.

**Read** Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (*Acts 2:14–41*). **How** are the important topics of Scripture, doctrine, prophecy, Christ, gospel, and salvation expressed by Peter, and why are these so essential in preaching?

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What an experience it must have been, hearing the fisherman Peter preach with such power and authority. His words did not show any kind of waffling, any kind of doubt, but rather revealed the Spirit working through Him. All through his homily, Peter never wavers, but using the Scriptures (then, only the Old Testament) he preaches with power the gospel of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Messiah, who is now “ ‘exalted to the right hand of God’ ” (*Acts 2:33*). It is amazing how, in such a small number of sentences, he covers such an incredible amount of information, everything from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to repentance, to the Second Coming.

**What** were the results of the preaching at this worship service? *See Acts 2:41*. **What** can we take away from this for ourselves and our Sabbath services?

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No doubt, this must have been a very special worship service. Yet, at the same time, we have the same promises that they had. We have the same Bible (and now the New Testament, as well) that they had, and we have the same Lord who offers us the same Spirit. Why, then, shouldn't we have worship services with the kind of power we see here? What is holding us back?

## Paul on Mars Hill

In the days of the early church, we can see another example of the issue of worship, and of what people worship—this time in the ministry of the apostle Paul when he was in Athens, the place where three of the world’s most influential philosophers (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) once lived.

What a different audience Paul had to deal with here than Peter did years earlier before all those devout Jews in Jerusalem!

**Read** Acts 17:15–34, the account of Paul’s preaching in Athens. How different was Paul’s witness to these people from that of Peter’s to the audience on the Day of Pentecost?

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One of the most obvious differences is that, unlike Peter, Paul here does not quote the Bible. In fact, he quoted a pagan author instead. At the same time, notice how Paul appealed to logic and reason: look around at the created world, he was saying, and you will see powerful evidence of the Creator God. He was starting out, using a kind of natural theology and pointing to the natural world as a reason to believe in the Creator God.

It is interesting to note the issue of worship here. These people were worshipping something that they did not understand. Paul sought to take that devotion and worship and turn it away from idols and other vain things and toward the living God. Humans seem to have an innate need to worship something, anything, and Paul here seeks to point them to the only thing truly worthy of their worship.

**On** what point did some of these people have a real problem, and why?

In the end, appeals to logic and reason and natural theology can take us only so far. Paul, in his witness, then sought to teach them about repentance, judgment, and the resurrection, teachings that need to be taken on faith. Hence, he did not have that much success with them. Though he had a few converts, most seemed to have gone back to their worship of what is vain, useless, and unable to save.

**In what ways can our worship services be better able to reach out to those who do not have a biblical background, who do not start with the same premises we do? How can we make our worship services more seeker-friendly?**

## Worship “Contrary to the Law”

Worship is not just about what you do in church on Sabbath. Worship encompasses aspects of our whole faith: what we believe, what we proclaim, how we act. Central to worship is the idea of the Lord as our Creator and our Redeemer. Everything about worship should flow from this fundamental and sacred truth. Again, worship is primarily about God and the actions of God in history. Authentic worship should draw participants into a closer walk with their Lord. It should lead us to a sense of awe, reverence, repentance, and love for Him and for others.

Though we always should be thinking about the Lord (*Luke 21:36, Ps. 1:2*), worship time should be something special, something unique. We cannot, however, rely on the church itself or on the worship leaders themselves to provide that kind of experience for us, however much of a role they can play. In the end, it comes down to ourselves and the attitude we bring to church with us on Sabbath.

At the same time, as we have seen all quarter, worship is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Our worship does not save us; rather, our worship is one of our responses to being saved.

**Read Acts 18:1–16. What charge was laid against Paul, and what does that tell us about worship?**

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It is fascinating that Paul was charged with persuading people toward a different kind of worship, a worship “contrary to the law” (*vs. 13*). (Even the Jews who believed in Jesus at times leveled a similar accusation against Paul.) The point in Acts 18 is that these people were so caught up in tradition, so caught up in how things were done in the past, so caught up in the forms of worship, that when Paul presented them with the One who was the whole purpose of their worship, the One whom they worshiped without knowing it, the One whom all the worship services really pointed to—they rejected what he said. So caught up were they in the law itself, they missed the One to whom the law pointed.

Again, though our circumstances today are radically different from Paul’s back then, we need to be careful not to allow our forms and traditions to get in the way of what our faith really should be about. Any worship that does not lead us directly to the Cross is misguided.

## Love Conquers All

It is so easy, from our perspective today, to look back at the early church as some sort of model of harmony and peace, an example of what true worship was all about. Unfortunately, New Testament history is so similar to Old Testament history in that both show just how far fallen we all are.

Take, for example, the church in Corinth, which Paul established on his second missionary journey. A commercial hub, known for its luxury and wealth, Corinth was also a center of one of the most sensual and degrading religions of that era. Influenced by their culture, immorality and dissension had invaded the church. And yet, as bad as it was, it was not the only problem there. Paul addressed other issues that were causing factions to develop in the church, including idolatry (*1 Cor. 10:14*) and the seeming overemphasis of the gifts, especially the misuse of the gift of tongues for self-seeking motives (*1 Corinthians 14*).

**In the midst of his discourse to the Corinthians and all their problems, Paul gives them the famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. What is the essential message here? More important, how can we apply this to our lives and worship today?**

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Paul suggested that no profession we make, no mighty miracles, no charismatic gifts, and no piety or zeal will profit us unless there is a heart filled with love for God, confirmed by love for one another. That, says Paul, is the ultimate gift for which we should seek, which may not be substituted with anything less.

Spiritual gifts are helpful, and Christians should use their gifts to honor God and to build up the church in unity. But never should any spiritual gift be used for display of self, personal gain, or in a disorderly way in worship or otherwise.

In the end, a church filled with loving, dedicated Christians will exert an influence and power that extend far beyond the weekly worship service.

**How much does unselfish love for others impact your daily life? That is, how much of your own time and energy do you spend on seeking to minister to others? How much of self are you willing to renounce, all for the good of other people? It is not so easy, is it?**

**Further Study:** Ellen G. White, “Pentecost,” pp. 35–46; “The Gift of the Spirit,” pp. 47–56; “Exalting the Cross,” pp. 201–210; “Corinth,” pp. 243–254; “Called to Reach a Higher Standard,” pp. 309–322, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“Holiness is not rapture: it is an entire surrender of the will to God; it is living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; . . . it is walking by faith . . . it is relying on God with unquestioning confidence, and resting in His love.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 51.

“What was the strength of those who in the past have suffered persecution for Christ’s sake? It was union with God, . . . with the Holy Spirit, . . . with Christ. Reproach and persecution have separated many from earthly friends, but never from the love of Christ.”—p. 85.

“[These] consecrated messengers . . . allowed no thought of self-exaltation to mar their presentation of Christ. . . . They coveted neither authority nor pre-eminence.”—p. 209.

“By idolatry he [Paul] meant not only the worship of idols, but self-serving, love of ease, the gratification of appetite and passion.”—p. 317.

## Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class talk about all the reasons we have for faith. What “proofs” do we have for what we believe? What rational and logical evidence do we have that helps affirm us in our beliefs? At the same time, what are the challenges to our faith? In the end, even despite these challenges, why do we believe what we do?
- 2 Think about some of the most powerful worship services you ever have attended. What made them so special, so powerful? What elements in particular made the difference? How could these elements be brought into your local church worship, if they are not there already?
- 3 What are some of the potential ways in which our worship services actually could impede our view of Christ and the Cross? How can we make sure that nothing is allowed to do that?
- 4 Dwell more on 1 Corinthians 13. What concrete steps could your church take to manifest the love that Paul talks about here?

## Making a Difference

Catherine didn't choose to study at the Adventist University at Cosendai in Cameroon. Her brother, an Adventist pastor, urged her to study there. Even though the university was just developing and still lacked many of the resources of more established schools, Catherine's parents gave their permission too. They had seen the difference the Adventist faith had made in Catherine's brother's life.

When Catherine's friends learned that she was planning to study at an Adventist university, they warned her not to go, not to join the Adventist Church. "We won't be your friends if you become an Adventist," they threatened.

Catherine resisted the Adventist influence, even though she attended worship and chapel services several times a week, sat through countless classes that began with prayer, and studied the Bible in her religion classes. She made friends with other students and noticed the difference in the lives of the Adventist students. The impact of daily prayers and frequent conversations about faith and God challenged her thinking. "I couldn't help but think about God," she says. She began feeling God draw her to Himself.

Her non-Adventist friends urged her not to give in to the religious influence at the school. "You can be a Christian without being an Adventist," one friend said. Others urged her to remain faithful to her family's religion. Catherine had resisted God's call as long as she could. But the call of God was stronger, and at the end of a Week of Prayer Catherine took her stand to follow Jesus.

"I hope that the way God has changed my life will draw my friends to Jesus," she says. "I'm not a preacher, and I don't want to force them to follow my example. I just want them to see the difference Jesus is making in my life and consider asking Jesus to change their lives too."

"The Adventist University in Cameroon may not be fancy, but it has made a huge difference in my life. I have received far more than a degree here; I will have found Christ as my Lord and Savior."

This quarter the Adventist University at Cosendai will receive part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering to help build its new campus. Your special offering will help grow this university, and your weekly mission offerings will help people in Cameroon and around the world build believers for eternity.

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