

Instructions about Worship

SCRIPTURE: 1 Timothy 2:1-6; 3:14-16

**KEY VERSE: There is one God;
there is also one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus.**

—1 Timothy 2:5

Ancient Worship

During the past four decades the Christian community has been experiencing a dynamic rebirth. People in churches around the world have been seeking a deeper understanding of what it means to worship God. Where better to search for that understanding than in the Bible? Indeed, the Bible will be our sourcebook during this quarter as we embark on a New Testament survey reflecting worship in the early Church. Hymns, prayers, apocalyptic visions, and letters of instructions reveal the spiritual culture and practice of the first Christians.



Justin Martyr (103–165), an early Christian philosopher and apologist, in his *First Apology*,¹ described a typical worship service:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president

in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

While the New Testament doesn't give detailed information about the order of worship in the first Christian services, it does describe the basic elements of worship in the early Christian Church:

- prayer
- praise
- confession of sin
- confession of faith
- Scripture reading and preaching
- the Lord's Supper
- the offering

Prayer is basic to worship, but we don't know exactly how the early Church prayed. While Justin Martyr's description indicates that the congregation prayed together, others think perhaps a leader prayed on behalf of the congregants. Another possibility is that the congregation recited a common prayer. Whatever the form, it is clear that prayer has been part of worship from the beginning, and continues to be a central element in Christian worship today.

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Closely related to prayer, and sometimes incorporated into it, is *praise*. Almost all the prayers recorded in the New Testament contain an element of praise to God. Early worshipers sang their praises as well. At the outset, the Psalter (a collection of Psalms) probably served as the hymnal for the early Church. During this quarter

we will study fragments of early hymns found in passages such as **Philippians 2:5-11** and **1 Timothy 3:14-16**. The hymns recorded in Revelation have inspired many modern-day songs of praise.

Confessions of faith were also part of worship in the early Christian Church. The Old Testament's *Shema*, which declares that "**The LORD is our God, the LORD alone**" (**Deuteronomy 6:4**), was essentially a confession of faith. However, the early Church adopted a new, distinctively Christian confession instead. "Jesus is Lord" became the standard confession of faith, illustrating that the faith of the primitive Church was faith in Jesus as Savior and God. Confession of faith was primarily linked to baptism, which was also a normal part of worship.

The writings of Paul give us a glimpse into worship in the early Church. Writing to Timothy, a pastoral leader, Paul shared his thoughts on prayer (**1 Timothy 2:1-6**). In his letter, Paul also incorporated the text from what is considered to be an early baptismal confession (**2:5-6**) and one of the Church's earliest creedal statements set to music (**3:16**). It is with these texts that we begin this quarter's study.

† 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-4

¹ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for everyone, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. ³ This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Intercessory Prayer

Prayers of intercession are prayers made on behalf of others: those with special needs; those who are in positions of authority, both in the church and state; those who are part of the local community of faith as well as the larger

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 1: INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT WORSHIP

February 28

(MONDAY)

The Ministry of the Mediator

HEBREWS 8:6-12

March 1

(TUESDAY)

Worship and Thanksgiving

PSALM 95:1-7

March 2

(WEDNESDAY)

Prayer and Supplication

EPHESIANS
6:18-24

March 3

(THURSDAY)

The Spirit's Intercession

ROMANS 8:22-27

community of the nation and the world. Paul reminded Timothy that Christians should pray for everyone.

Christians in the early Church commonly prayed for public authorities—even the emperor. Indeed, they considered it their duty to do so. Paul’s advice for them to pray for everyone, including “**all who are in high positions**,” suggests that the spiritual discipline of prayer yields both practical and spiritual benefits (v. 2b). The leaders of the empire, along with everyone else, should experience salvation (v. 3-4). The practice of inclusive prayer is in accord with God’s character as Savior of the world.

Intercessory prayer remains a vital part of Christian worship. While for centuries only the clergy offered the prayers on behalf of the people, the worship renewal movement has restored much of the ancient congregation participation. Some worship leaders engage the congregation through the use of a “bidding” prayer. When this form is used, the leader suggests a specific topic and invites congregants to offer their own individual prayers for the stated needs. In other churches, intercession may take the form of a litany or responsive prayer.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How can we effectively pray for “everyone”?
- How can we pray for leaders with whom we disagree?

Baptists Are a Non-Creedal People

As Baptists, we have never adopted a universal creed. There were times in Baptist history, however, when fundamentalists attempted to introduce a creed or uniform confession of faith. For example, at the 1922 annual convention in Indianapolis, Indiana, Dr. Cornelius Woelfkin, a New York minister and a former president of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (now International Ministries), introduced a substitute motion in opposition to the proposal to adopt a creed. His motion cited the New Testament as the basis for our faith and practice. Woelfkin’s motion was passed by a two to one margin.

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We can learn from creeds, however, and we certainly can enhance our acts of worship by integrating statements or confessions of faith into our weekly orders of worship. Historic church creeds have their origins in the biblical text. While we don't find any formal creedal statements in the Bible, we do find affirmations of faith, which have a similar format. Such biblical statements were primarily acts of worship, not tests of doctrine. As noted earlier, the New Testament confessions of faith stem from the faith in Jesus as Savior and God. The resurrection of Christ is non-negotiable in the Christian's faith statement. Look for the resurrection story in this ancient creed quoted by Paul in his letter to Timothy:

† 1 TIMOTHY 2:5-6

⁵ For

there is one God;

there is also one mediator between God and humankind.

Christ Jesus, himself human,

⁶ who gave himself a ransom for all

—this was attested at the right time.

These rhythmical clauses are thought to be part of a baptismal confession. If this is truly the case, Paul may have used this confession in order to support his directive to pray for everyone. That Jesus gave himself a ransom for all means that salvation is for everyone. Therefore, pray for all people.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Read 1 Timothy 2:5-6 aloud and reflect on the effect these words might have on your spirituality. Of what important aspects of God are you reminded?
- How might the language found in a creed or affirmation of faith help you communicate your faith to others?

Daily Bible Readings

**WEEK 1:
INSTRUCTIONS
ABOUT
WORSHIP**

March 4

(FRIDAY)

Instructions on Prayer

LUKE 11:1-13

March 5

(SATURDAY)

The Goal of Instruction

1 TIMOTHY 1:1-7

March 6

(SUNDAY)

The Great Mystery

1 TIMOTHY 2:1-6;
3:14-16

† 1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that,

¹⁵ if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillars and bulwark of the truth.

¹⁶ Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:

He was revealed in flesh,
vindicated in spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among Gentiles,
believed in throughout the world,
taken up in glory.

An Ancient Hymn

In Paul's longer letters, he often "took a break" near the middle. This letter is no exception. Verses fourteen through sixteen constitute that break and mark a change in content and shift in emphasis. In effect, they form a bridge between the two major sections of the letter. Embedded in this bridge is a fragment of an early Christian hymn. It was a hymn to Christ that has the effect of a creed. Most scholars view it as a *heilsgeschichtliche* hymn—a hymn that tells the story of salvation.

Early Christian hymns generally communicated the developing convictions of the new Christians. They exalted Jesus Christ as the Son of God in ways that were similar to the Psalmists'. It stands to reason that the first followers of the risen Christ would express their praise and devotion in ways to which they were accustomed. Therefore, early Christian hymnody evolved in the traditional style of the Psalms.

A number of hymns (or fragments thereof) are to be found in New Testament literature. The earliest account of the existence of Christian hymns is found in **1 Corinthians 14:26**. In his writing Paul quoted and sometimes adapted the lyrics of hymns. Did he borrow from the song writers in order to simply embellish his writing? Probably not. New Testament hymns celebrate Christ in his exalted position as Lord and Savior of the universe. As such, they countered the heretical ideas put forth by false teachers.

Great Hymn Singing in the Church

Hymns come in many styles. Yet we seem to sing them all alike—blandly. The average hymnal contains some 1500 years’ worth of musical, poetic, and theological expressions of faith. This fact alone should stimulate excitement in congregants as we open our hymnals each Sunday morning. But just the opposite seems to be true. The singing is bland: not too fast or too slow, not too loud or soft, and often not very interesting. Nevertheless, we continue to believe that singing together is one of the “givens” in the weekly order of worship. How can we make our hymn singing truly great?

Background information about the hymn can help. If the song leader shares a few details about the origin of a specific hymn, we are more likely to identify with some part of the narrative and sing accordingly. To be familiar with the story of Fanny Crosby, for example, is to understand her zeal for evangelism which resulted in her writing “Tell Me the Story of Jesus.” Her work with derelicts in New York City led her to write “Rescue the Perishing.” “Take the World, but Give Me Jesus” speaks of the realities she wanted to share with people who needed a Savior’s love. Many of us have been touched by Fanny Crosby’s hymns, so why not sing them with feeling? When we do, we not only honor the hymn writer but we also honor God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What can you do to help improve the hymn singing in your church (even if you aren’t a musician)?
- Browse through the pages of a hymnal. Select a hymn about God and read the lyrics. How is your understanding of God enhanced by this hymn? Do the same with a hymn about Jesus and another about the Holy Spirit.

NOTE

1. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, as it appears on www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm.