

A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES

“Why the Word First?”

Our last time together, we discussed some of the reactions people in the synagogue would have to Jesus. I think we fail to appreciate the confrontational nature of His earthly ministry. It is one thing for us to walk up to somebody and claim to believe in Jesus, the Son of God, and offer them salvation in His name. It is quite another to step up to them and say with authority, “I who speak to you am He.” In more ways than one, He has done the hard work of evangelism for us!

With regard to the offense He and His message would cause, I mentioned a quote of C. S. Lewis. The following was part of a talk he gave on BBC radio more than fifty years ago.

“There was a time when I believed that the universe was just an accident, that God was a fantasy, and that Christ was just a good moral teacher. Not so now. You see, I discovered that Christ denied that there was any truth to my arguments. What’s more, He said He was the Son of God. Here I was troubled. The man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing that Jesus said wouldn’t be a great moral teacher at all. He would either be a lunatic on the level with the man that says he’s a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make a choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don’t let’s come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He hasn’t left that open to us. He didn’t intend to.”¹

This doesn’t really speak to what we are discussing today. But it was so good that I had to share it!

We concluded our last study with the observation that in the orthodox order of worship, the ministry of the Word comes first. [Since I’ve mentioned the Orthodox, I should clarify some terms that I have used freely. I have referred to the non-Orthodox or non-Catholic church at large as the Reformed church to include both Protestant and Anabaptist movements. Technically speaking Protestantism is divided between the Lutheran or Evangelical Church and the Reformed Church (Calvin and Knox).] What is the order of worship in most Protestant services?

We need not go much farther that our own typical service in Maranatha Church:

- 1. Call to Worship*
- 2. Praise and worship*
- 3. Announcements*
- 4. Teaching*
- 5. Love feast*

I spent eight years in New Life Christian Fellowship. Following is a typical order of service right out of a bulletin:

¹ Source: www.gospelcom.net/chi/EARLYF/trial3.shtml

1. *Welcome*
2. *Praise and worship*
3. *Worship in giving (offering)*
4. *Special music or drama*
5. *Announcements*
6. *Message*

A variation in the order of worship occurs when Holy Communion is offered. Communion is generally served at the front part of the service during the praise and worship time. This is very typical in Protestantism. So typical, in fact, that it was the order of worship I was taught and followed even when I was involved in a Christian cult as a young man!

What is the apparent order of worship in the church gatherings mentioned in the Bible?

Acts 2:42

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. NKJV

Acts 2:42 expresses the character of the church in its infancy. The order of their activities is listed as follows:

1. The Apostles' Doctrine (the Word)
2. Fellowship (*koinonia*- communion, sharing, intimacy)
3. Breaking of bread (love feast or communion)
4. Prayer

We know that God's purpose for His Church, His house, is that it be a house of prayer. Look at all they did before they got to the prayer! What was the result of following this general order?

Acts 2:43 NKJV

Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

People feared God and His power was manifest in the community. Wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

1 John 1:3

that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. NKJV

"That which we have seen and heard we declare to you" – The Apostles' Doctrine.

"That you also may have fellowship with us" – Fellowship.

"Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" – Communion

Verses 6-9 of Chapter 1 tell us about testimony and forgiveness of sins. From that point forward, John defines our relationship with God and admonishes us to abide in Him. And then comes 1 John 5:14-15.

1 John 5:14-15

14 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, **that if we ask anything according to His will,** He hears us.

15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. NKJV

"If we ask anything according to His will" – Prayer.

Col 3:16 NIV

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

In Colossians we are told that the word of Christ dwelling in us is a prerequisite to our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The New Testament evidence indicates that the Scripture received the primary focus of the public meeting.

1 Tim 4:13 NIV

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

Paul didn't write to Timothy and tell him to devote himself to building a praise and worship movement. Are we saying that praise and worship are not important? Not at all. But without the Word of God, both Living and written, as our foundation all we do is suspect. If our worship is not based on Scripture, then it can not be true worship.

John 18:20

"I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. NIV

Jesus spoke to the world through His teaching. Teaching was His primary means of communication, not music or announcements.

Acts 5:17-25

17 Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.

18 They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.

20 **"Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."**

21 At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles.

22 But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported,

23 "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."

24 On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.

25 Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." NIV

Public preaching was the hallmark of the apostles' ministry. It mattered not if they were beaten or incarcerated or both – they preached the gospel!

If this then is the evidence of the New Testament, why do we Protestants generally begin our services in song and end it with the Word? There are several reasons and arguments.

The Historical Reason-

When Martin Luther broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, he developed the basic order of worship followed by most of Protestantism today. Luther's order of worship has stuck for nearly 500 years!

An Intellectual Argument-

An intellectual argument for beginning the public service with song might go something like this, "Worship songs open our hearts to hear from the Word of God and prepare us to receive the message. When we allow our hearts to be softened by hymns and worship songs, we are more ready to accept what God has to say to us from His Word."

Sound persuasive and logical, doesn't it? I think if I searched through notes and tapes enough, I've probably used this argument myself more than once! But let's examine its premise with a little more scrutiny. What is the purpose of worship? To worship God! Who is the focus and most important figure in worship? The One we are worshipping! If our primary purpose in worship is to prepare ourselves to hear a teaching, who is the real focus of our worship? Ourselves!

A Scriptural Argument-

We begin with music because of what is stated in Psalm 100:4.

Ps 100:4

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. NIV

When we argue that this is the way we should start a church service because this is the way in which we are to approach God in His dwelling place, we fail to appreciate what had to be done by the worshipper before he entered the gates!

Ps 24:3-4

3 Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?

4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. NIV

They had to be clean BEFORE they entered the sanctuary! Herein lies the problem with starting the service with worship. We have to ask ourselves, have we given ourselves the opportunity to be of clean hands and a pure heart? Have we given the Holy Spirit time to prick our conscience and convict us of sin, righteousness, and judgment before we start singing praise songs and lifting our hands to Him? How often have we sung in a worship service with sin on us and our hearts far from Him?

An Old Testament Example-

Neh 9:1-3

- 1 On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.
- 2 Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.
- 3 They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God. NIV

Verse three gives us the order of this revival service during the days of Nehemiah. For a quarter of the day, they read from the Book of the Law of the Lord. The Law exposed their sin, so for the next quarter they confessed their sin and then were able to worship.

The Tabernacle of Moses had the brazen laver as the Temple had the Sea and the wash basins. The priests were required to examine themselves in the mirror of the laver and wash their hands and feet with its water. The laver represents the Word of God.

Ex 38:8

He made the laver of bronze and its base of bronze, **from the bronze mirrors** of the serving women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. NKJV

James 1:23-25

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, **he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror;**

24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.

25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. NKJV

2 Cor 3:13-18

13 unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away.

14 But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ.

15 But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart.

16 Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

18 But we all, with unveiled face, **beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord**, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. NKJV

Just as the priests had to examine their reflection in the waters of the basin to make sure they were clean and properly outfitted before ministering to the Lord in the holy place, even so we must examine our lives in the mirror of Scripture to ensure we are what the Lord says we are to be.

Eph 5:25-27

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her
26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,
27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. NIV

Note that the Church is presented to Christ after the washing of water through the word so that His bride might be radiant and spotless when she comes before Him. When we begin our services with the Word, we can allow it to examine and cleanse our hearts so that we are prepared to approach the throne of God. The Word sanctifies and purifies us.

John 15:3 "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." NIV

John 17:17 "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." NIV

Other Benefits of Beginning with the Word-

1. It makes us a listener in the House of God.

1 Sam 3:10

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." NIV

Eccl 5:1-2

1 Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; **and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools**, for they do not know that they do evil.

2 Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. NKJV

2. It allows the light of God's Word to expose the darkness in our lives.

Eph 5:11-14

11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

12 For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.

13 But everything exposed by the light becomes visible,

14 for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." NIV

3. It feeds the sheep.

John 21:17

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." **Jesus said, "Feed my sheep.** NIV

1 Peter 5:1-3

1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:

2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

3 Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. KJV

Acts 20:28 KJV

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Starting next week, we will begin preparing ourselves to be an effectual house of prayer for all peoples by allowing God to speak to us through His Word first.