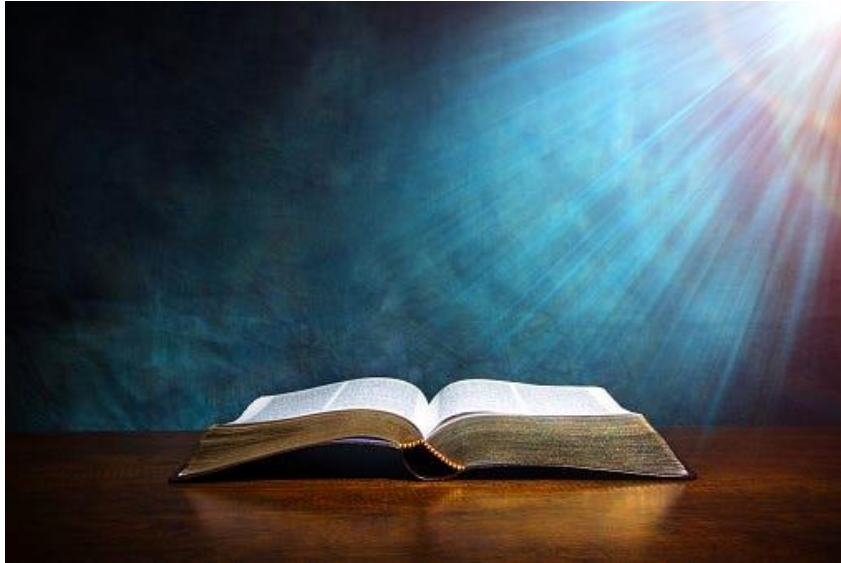


# Worship According to the Word

Seven elements for worship prescribed by the Word of God



*“Be sure you make it according to the pattern shown you on the mountain” (Exodus 25:40; 26:30; Hebrews 8:5)*

## Introduction

A certain worship service lasted for three hours. An estimated 1000 people were in attendance. During that lengthy service, no Scripture was read, no prayers for the congregation were offered, no confession of sin was made. There was no congregational singing, no preaching of a sermon, no celebration of the sacraments.

You may ask, “So what did they do for three hours?”

They had a group dancing on “stage” for 45 minutes; they received various offerings for 45 minutes; they climaxed the service with everyone coming forward and repeating over and over, “I am healed! I am healed! I am healed!” The pastor assured them that this repetitive statement constituted a “prophetic saying.” If they believed as they chanted, they would be healed.

What was the effect of this worship service on the people? In terms of experiencing the presence of God in worship, the effect was absolutely nil. Nothing happened. Certainly nothing happened positively. Negatively, worse than nothing happened.

Remember David and the ark? Remember Uzzah and his well-meant intervention? David intended to provide a model for dedicated worship before the people. Because the ark of the covenant symbolized God's throne on earth, he determined to bring the ark to a position of prominence in Jerusalem next to his own throne. But on the way, well-meaning Uzzah steadied the ark when the oxen stumbled, and God struck Uzzah dead (2 Samuel 6:6–7).

Why? Why did the Lord take this drastic action?

Because their approach to a holy God contradicted the Lord's own revealed way for worship, that's why. Rather than having the Levites alone transport the ark on their shoulders by its permanently positioned carrying poles, they presumed their imaginative ways could excel the way God himself had determined for his worship (Exodus 25:10–15; Numbers 4:15; cf. 1 Chronicles 15:15). Though well-meaning, they forgot the precise directive given by God through Moses concerning worship at the time of the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness: "Be sure you make it according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Exodus 25:40; 26:30; cf. Hebrews 8:5).

But may we not expect greater tolerance from God when his ordained way of worship is not so perfectly respected today? After all, are not we frail human creatures now living under the greater grace of the new covenant era?

In response, should it not be noted that many more people died for worship-abuse among church members in Corinth than the single man Uzzah at the time of David's abortive bringing up the Ark? According to the Apostle Paul, "That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep in death" (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Because of improper worship practices, Paul reports that many people in the Corinthian church had gotten sick, and a number had died.

In the words of the sons of the reformers,

*The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture* (Westminster Confession of Faith xxi, i).

So this matter of worship is a vital part of human life in relation to the Creator of heaven and earth that must not be treated lightly. As these biblical incidents indicate, proper worship is a life-and-death matter. It brings constant refreshment for life when done properly. But worship wrongly practiced removes life from the misdirected worshipper, no matter how devoted he may be. Absolutely critical is the consistent practice of true worship according to the Word by every individual and every congregation of professing believers.

So consider seven elements for worship prescribed by the Word. As often as possible, all seven of these elements should be present in every worship service. These seven biblical elements of worship are:

1. Singing
2. Reading Scripture
3. Prayer
4. Public Testimony and Profession of Faith
5. Preaching
6. The Sacraments
7. Offerings

Scriptural directions for each of these worship elements deserve specific attention.

## **1. Singing**

Not just any singing. By the models of Scripture, singing should be **congregational, substantial** and **edifying**.

**(1) Firstly, proper singing in worship should be congregational.** See that six-foot elder standing with his arms folded and his lips firmly set? By determination he never sings a note. He's in church every Sunday, but his worship is deficient. See that clammed-up congregation? They have forfeited their right and their obligation to praise the Lord by worship in song.

They're letting the choir and the worship team do all the singing. So they fail to offer the sacrifice of praise to God that they owe.

Something unique happens when a human being sings. No other activity joins the right brain to the left, the mind to the heart, the body and soul in perfect harmony like singing. That's why Scripture specifically states, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly with all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16). This verse does not necessarily lay down the rule that all singing must follow the wording of the book of Psalms in the Old Testament, though many saints have interpreted it that way. But it does present an unequivocal command that all worshippers are expected to sing.

Many hindrances new and old can stifle the singing of the congregation. Choirs can usurp the role of congregational singing. Indeed, choirs can offer great encouragement to the soul in worship. Uplifting music often elevates a person's spirit. David organized choirs, wrote music and lyrics, appointed appropriate instrumental accompaniment and developed antiphonal responses (1 Samuel 16:18, 23; 2 Samuel 23:1; Amos 6:5; 1 Chronicles 23:5; 2 Chronicles 29:27, 30; Ezra 3:10; Nehemiah 12:24, 36). Yet as in everything else that is human, proper application tells the tale between blessing and curse. Without realizing it a choir can easily develop into a separate group in the church with its own agenda. Sometimes the greatest of choirs are so great that they stifle any and all singing by the person in the pew, while simultaneously overshadowing the sermon of the day.

Worship teams can encourage a congregation. But they can also overpower the singing of the people so that no voice can be heard but their own. They stand in front of the congregation, blasting with their loudspeakers, electronic keyboards, drums and guitars, while the congregation remains transfixed and numbed into silence. The worship team has practiced throughout the week. Its members are familiar with the words and tunes well before worship begins. So they regularly submerge the meagre effort of the "commoner" to praise the Lord in song.

Why huge amplifiers must magnify the music coming from the keyboard, the drums and the soloists is a great mystery. These amplifiers manufacture so many decibels of sound bites that they seriously threaten deafness to people sitting up front. "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit," including your bodily capacity to hear (1 Corinthians 6:19)?

Furthermore, what's the use of a member of the congregation singing when he cannot even hear his own voice, much less anybody else's? A proper worship service will promote full participation of all the people in the singing of the service.

**(2) Secondly, proper singing in worship must be substantial.** Mindless repetitions of musical phrases, no matter how God-glorifying they may be in themselves, quickly degenerate into vain repetitions. Would you actually stand before a dignitary such as your governor or a member of parliament and say, "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, praise the Lord" fifty times over without interruption or explanatory comment? How can you expect to communicate with the Almighty God with that kind of repetitive rhetoric? What do you think he is? Is your God nothing more than a parrot who can absorb what you say only when you repeat it a hundred times over?

You may choose to sing hymns and choruses as well as the Psalms. But the Psalms of Scripture set the standard, the model for proper singing in worship. Consider the depth of their sin-confession, the height of their praise, the breadth of their petition for the worldwide spread of the gospel among all peoples, lands and nations. When you can match the psalms in substance and poetic beauty with your singing, then you are singing in a scriptural manner. Allow no lesser substitutes.

**(3) Thirdly, proper singing must be edifying.** It must build up the saints in their most holy faith. It must take them beyond where they are to higher heights of glorifying God in worship. An old Jewish proverb says, "As a man sings, so is he." If the church sings only songs capable of being sung by children, it will remain childish in its faith. No wonder the church continues so long in its infancy. It sings like a baby, refusing to savor strong meat in its music. But among the activities of biblical worship is the responsibility to "speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16). By corporate singing each believer must build up others in their faith.

Have you ever seen a man, woman or child sing with such obvious enthusiasm that you instantly experience a great burst of blessing? Right now I can think of several people who bless me whenever I see or hear them sing to the Lord in worship!

So singing is one of the essential elements of Christian, biblical worship. From the song of Moses after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15) to the song of David at the bringing up of the ark-throne to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16; Psalm 96) to the song of the Lamb in Revelation

(Revelation 15), God's people have been a joyously singing community. No other religion can come close to matching it. Christianity at its core is a singing community.

It must never lose that distinctive. The Lord expects to hear us *all singing* when we come into his presence, for he himself is a singing God. As the prophet declares, “[The Lord] shall rejoice over you *with singing*” (Zephaniah 3:17).

## 2. Reading Scripture

Reading from the Bible obviously should be a part of every worship service. Yet it hardly ever is given its proper place as a vital part of worship these days. The preacher may read a few verses as his sermon text. But little or no place is given to the pure and purposeful reading of Scripture.

How strange! Here we have God's inspired Word that contains everything necessary for fullness of life. Yet we give more time and attention in worship to announcements about meetings this coming week than to reading and hearing God's own words. Does that really make sense?

Listen to these admonitions in the Bible that speak directly to the matter of the public reading of Scripture:

[Moses says]: “*You shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess*” (Deuteronomy 31:11–13).

When he commands that the people regularly read “this law” in their assemblies for worship, Moses refers to the entirety of the book of Deuteronomy. This book of the Bible would take several hours to read. Everyone in their community was required to be present throughout this reading, including men, women, children and aliens. Yet worshippers today would find it difficult to absorb even ten minutes of Scripture reading in a worship service.

A similar admonition recurs at the end of Old Testament history. God's people are deeply involved in re-instituting their worship practices after seventy years of exile to Babylon:

*Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon ... in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law (Nehemiah 8:2–3).*

Once more the whole congregation of God's people assemble to hear the reading of the Word of God. Once more this reading involves an extended portion of Scripture, not merely a short selection. Ezra read "from daybreak to noon." As much as six hours were taken up in nothing more and nothing less than reading the Word of God.

Of course, it would take time for a congregation to become accustomed to listening to Scripture being read for an extended period of time. Instant internet connections, coded text messages, one-line summaries of major news events do not prepare people today for listening attentively to a reading that continues "from daybreak to noon." But even ten minutes of uninterrupted reading from Scripture in a worship service ...? Fifteen minutes ...?? Twenty ...???

A third admonition directing the church in its reading of Scripture occurs in one of Paul's letters:

*Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (1 Timothy 4:13).*

Right alongside "preaching" and "teaching" is the "public reading of Scripture." Yet regularly in worship the preacher tends to "rush to the sermon," to move on to the "real thing," which he regards as his preaching. Indeed, preaching must be viewed as a focal moment in worship. But should not God also have a chance to speak? Reading Scripture (without comment) is the one moment in worship when the Lord has an opportunity to speak for himself. Yet the tendency is to minimize Scripture reading, to "get through it" and move on to what may be regarded as the more important aspects of worship. But what could be more relevant in worship than to have God himself speak directly to his assembled people?

One person memorized the whole gospel of Mark and then regularly recited the book in a single setting. His recitations were so effective that the hearers hardly noted the passage of time. Yet could not this same effect be duplicated in every reading of Scripture, even though on a smaller scale? On one occasion, a Bible teacher read a passage from the gospel of John with such

meaningful inflection that no need remained for him to interpret the passage. The word of God spoke for itself.

So read Scripture in worship. Read longer passages. Read with understanding. Practice reading beforehand so you know the points needing emphasis or a change of tone in the voice. Treat the reading of Scripture as one of the most vital portions of every worship service.

### **3. Prayer**

Prayer in worship must be with substance. Prayer in worship is not the time for parroting commonplace phrases that communicate little in terms of meaningful interaction with the Almighty. These prayers in worship should embrace all the essential elements of prayer, including praise, confession, thanksgiving, intercession, and petition. The “five-finger exercise in prayer” may aid a person in being sure all these basic elements are covered. Consider more fully these various elements of proper prayer:<sup>3</sup>

#### **(1) Praise**

Beginning with praise to God for who he is in his essence will have a serious impact on the remainder of your prayer. If you begin by praising God for his unlimited power, you will find it much easier to trust him for all your needs as you list your pressing concerns later. If you praise him for his holiness, you will not be so glib about confessing your sins. If you praise him for the wideness of his mercy, you will be prepared to forgive others even as he has forgiven you. For these and other reasons, open your prayers with praise. If you need help in this area, study—even memorize—models of praise from Scripture, such as 1 Chronicles 29:10–13, Psalms 146–150, and Ephesians 1:3–6.

#### **(2) Confession**

Praying without including confession of sin is like driving an automobile with four unpatched flat tires. People need to be led to the throne of grace that they may have their “flat tires” repaired through the forgiveness that is in Christ. Otherwise they may presume an acceptance with God without consciousness of the necessity for regular application of the blood of the Lamb.



After 70 years of chastening judgment, God's people were on the brink of restoration after exile. But just before their return, Daniel offered a prayer of confession on behalf of the people:

*We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets ... we are covered with shame ... because we have sinned ... we have rebelled against him; we have not obeyed the Lord ... All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you ... (Daniel 9:4–19).*

Note well the thoroughness of Daniel's confession. How seldom does this depth of acknowledgement of wrongdoing manifest itself in the corporate prayers of confession in worship. Many services of worship fail to include even the smallest prayer of confession for the people.

Jesus' parable contrasting the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector underscores the necessity of confessing sin for acceptance with God. In essence, the tax collector prays: "O God, may your righteous wrath toward me, *the sinner*, be resolved in peace." Says Jesus, "This man went away justified" (Luke 18:9–14); and apart from God's justification of the sinner, there can be no acceptance, no fellowship with God. In what a sad condition is a congregation left, when none of the prayers in worship properly seek God's forgiveness through meaningful confession that pleads the priceless blood of Christ as the grounds of forgiveness.

### **(3) Thanksgiving**

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*). If a human parent experiences pain over a child that never says "Thank you," will God fail to notice thanklessness? "Where are the nine?" Jesus asked when nine out of ten healed lepers failed to return and thank him (Luke 17:17). Giving thanks to God in prayer is the one sacrifice that will always be acceptable to him. Could it be that nine out of ten times in prayer you fail to express genuine thanks to God for his limitless gifts?

### **(4) Intercession**

"Every believer a priest" was one of the great truths re-discovered in the protestant reformation. But of what good use is a priest who does not intercede, who fails to mediate for others? As

Samuel declared, “Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:23).

In ever-enlarging circles, pray for your household/church/ community/town or village/nation/world. Have a heart that feels the desperate need others have for the all-sufficiency of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **(5) Petition**

Always the people of your church will have their special needs. Always you yourself will have your personal burdens. But a sign of God’s grace toward you may be manifest in your willingness to wait and pray last for your own needs. Yet these personal needs definitely must be expressed before the Lord. As Paul says:

*Don’t be anxious for anything, but in everything make your desires known to God. Then the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6–7).*

What forms the substance of your petitions offered for your church and yourself? It’s your *desires*, the things you desire for them and for yourself. Behind every sense of need, every anxiety, is a desire. Make those desires the object of your petitions. If the desire proves to be improper, the very process of forming it into a prayer will very likely expose its selfishness. At the same time, as you express your desire before your heavenly Father, you may come to recognize what you personally must do in order to realize that desire. But if it’s something totally beyond your control, expressing your desire to God enables you to turn it over altogether to Him.

A healthy dimension to your petitions may be derived from the form of the Lord’s Prayer. To teach his disciples how to pray, Jesus said, “When you pray say, ‘Our Father ... give us this day our daily bread ...’” (Matthew 6:9, 11). In other words, prayer should be expressed with equal concern for the needs of others as well as yourself. This model prayer of Jesus is deliberately designed to be prayed corporately, by a community of God’s people.

Indeed, not mindlessly as is the way of some, but sincerely as an expression of united piety before the Lord.

This praying the Lord's Prayer in unison must not serve as a justification for everyone in a group praying simultaneously out loud, with each person voicing his own personal concerns, sometimes even in different languages. Such a cacophony of sound has no place in worship. Paul clearly corrected this error when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth. Praying, praising or prophesying must be done "one at a time" (1 Corinthians 14:27), since all the various gifts must always be exercised "for the edification of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:26). This edification can occur only if people understand what is being said. For how can others join in someone else's thanksgiving if they cannot understand what is being spoken? (1 Corinthians 14:16–17). Otherwise if an unbeliever comes in when everyone in the church is simultaneously praying in their own distinctive words, will he not conclude you are out of your mind? (1 Corinthians 14:23).

As a crucial part of worship, prayer in all its various elements must have its proper place. But even prayer in its most fervent form must always be offered "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

#### **4. Public Testimony and Profession of Faith**

Most people immediately identify Philippians as the "book of joy" in the New Testament. After being thrown into prison, Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). In every chapter of this little book, the imprisoned Apostle repeatedly calls on all believers in every circumstance to "rejoice in the Lord" (cf. Philippians 1:18; 2:17–18, 28–29; 3:1, 4:10).

But what is the "book of joy" in the Old Testament? Rather surprising is the fact that just behind Psalms and Isaiah as books of joy in the Old Testament is the lawbook of Deuteronomy! As the people are instructed regarding the lawful way of worship in the land, they are expected to rejoice (Deuteronomy 12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:11; 26:11; cf. 32:43; 33:18). Even the curses of the covenant are anticipated "because you did not serve the Lord your God [in worship] joyfully and gladly" (Deuteronomy 28:47).

Especially significant as a factor of worship in Deuteronomy is the testimony to be offered by the worshipper as he comes before the priest:

*Go to the place the Covenant Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name and say to the priest in office at the time, "I declare today ..." Then you shall declare before the Covenant Lord your God, "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt ... So the Lord brought us out of Egypt ... He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey;" ... and you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Covenant Lord your God has given you and your household (Deuteronomy 26:1–11).*

This personal testimony to God's faithfulness in a worship context is as ancient as the initial worship practices of God's people in the land of promise. The idea of personal testimony in worship is by no means a novel idea.

This testimony in worship includes not only a statement of personal experience regarding God's faithfulness. It also involves the confession of the worshipper concerning what he believes about this God whom he professes. This Old Testament saint affirms that he was once a wandering alien. But the Covenant Lord redeemed him from bondage in Egypt and gave him a land flowing with milk and honey.

The New Testament also provides examples of personal testimony regarding faith that functioned within the worshipping community. Paul's first letter to Pastor Timothy provides a prime example:

*Without controversy the mystery that produces godliness is great: He*

*was manifest in the flesh,*

*was justified in the spirit,*

*was seen of angels,*

*was preached among the nations,*

*was believed on in the world,*

*was taken up into glory (1 Timothy 3:16).*

In this Christological confession of faith, six succinct phrases with identical grammatical structure summarize the span of Christ's redemptive activity from incarnation to glorification. Other likely summaries of early Christian confessions may be found in Philippians 2:6–11 and Colossians 1:15–20.

These sorts of personal and corporate testimonies clearly belong in the worship services of the church today. At times one of the classic creeds of Christian confession such as the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, or portions from the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Westminster Confession of Faith or the Canons of Dort may serve to underscore the historic heart of the church's faith. At other times, an individual's testimony of salvation or provision by God's grace may supply a personal touch to a sometimes impersonal service of worship. As the psalmist says:

*I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you (Psalm 22:22 NIV)*

*Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from the hand of the enemy (Psalm 107:2 KJV).*

*I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation (Psalm 111:1 ESV).*

## **5. Preaching**

Preaching may be defined as: “the official, ministerial, public proclamation, explanation, illustration and application of the Word of God written as it reveals Christ to the church and to the world.” This definition has already been discussed in the previous materials of this book (pp. 23–48). At this point it is necessary only to underscore the importance of preaching as a vital part of every worship service.

Apart from preaching, worship is incomplete. Preaching may be regarded as the climax, the focal point of every worship service. For in preaching based on the written Word of God, the revealed word is declared and applied to the lives of the people. A single text from the last chapter penned by Paul and addressed to Pastor Timothy drives home this point. Says the Apostle:

*“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus ...”* No more solemn basis for a charge to a person responsible for leading God’s people in worship could be imagined.

*“... who will judge the living and the dead ...”* The responsibility now being declared will provide the basis for the judgment of God’s servant both in this life and in that which is to come. How then will you stand before God as a worship leader? Not on the basis of the size of the congregation. Not according to the success of a church program. But according to how faithfully you preach the Word you shall be judged!

*“... and in view of His appearing and His kingdom ...”* When Christ returns, he will first ask his servants about one matter in particular. That principal matter, as the Apostle’s words indicate, is how he preached.

*“... I give you this charge ...”* One charge and only one provides the focus for Paul’s admonition. One indispensable task. What is it?

*“Preach!”* That’s it! That summarizes it all. Preach! Declare his glory among the nations.

*“Preach the Word!”* The Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word. Preach from Genesis to Revelation. Preach the law, the prophets and the writings. Preach the gospels, the Acts, the epistles and Revelation. Do not preach the same message over and over with slightly different packaging. Instead, preach the whole counsel of God.

*“Correct, Rebuke, Encourage ...”* Never preach in a compromising and accommodating manner, but always in a way that is precisely tailored to the needs of the listeners.

*“... in season and out of season ...”* Never let the whim of the populace determine the character of the message.

*“... with great patience and careful instruction”* (2 Timothy 4:1–2). Never try to get through the whole gospel in a hurry. Always take time to be sure the people understand each aspect of his Word.

With this admonition coming in the final chapter of the last book of the Apostle to the Nations, how could preaching be viewed in any way other than as a major focal point of every Christian worship service? How could preaching be so degenerated, so minimized, so casually treated?

Worship properly done will always place preaching front and center of every service, for worship is never complete without a proper preaching of the Word.

## **6. The Sacraments**

Jesus Christ while on earth instituted two and only two outward signs of grace that were to be received inwardly by faith: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both these outward signs had corresponding worship rituals under the old covenant, with circumcision anticipating baptism and the Passover anticipating the Lord's Supper. Baptism, just as circumcision, now serves as the sign of entrance into the covenant. The closest possible connection between these two worship ceremonies is underscored by the Apostle Paul: "... by being buried with him in baptism, you were circumcised" (Colossians 2:11–12). Rather startlingly, the Apostle declares that Christians by the worshipful rite of baptism experience the essence of the cleansing ritual of circumcision.

Any and all arguments supporting the neglect of the baptismal "rite of passage" must be strongly opposed. Apart from circumcision under the old covenant, a person could not be regarded as a member of the people of God. He must be "cut off" from God's people (Genesis 17:14). He must be denied the privilege of participating in the Passover (cf. Exodus 12:48). The same principle holds true today with respect to baptism in relation to the Lord's Supper. A person may in fact be a Christian, a true and trusting believer in Christ. But apart from submitting to the worshipful act of baptism, the church should not allow him to enjoy the privileges of participating with them in the Lord's Supper.

Sometimes people manifest an eager desire to be baptized "a second time." Perhaps they have come to realize they were not truly believers in Christ at the time of their baptism. Perhaps they recently returned from Palestine with "holy water" taken from the Jordan River. Or perhaps they may have concluded that a wrong mode of baptism was used in their case.

But a legitimate act of baptism in worship cannot be enacted a second time any more than a second "circumcision" could have been experienced under the old covenant. A later coming to faith after having being baptized as an infant only displays the effectiveness of the initial baptism. For the effectiveness of the sacrament is not bound inseparably to the time of its experience.

Some people may desire to be “unbaptized.” They wish to renounce their baptism and regard themselves as people who have never been baptized. But a person cannot “unbaptize” himself any more than a person could “uncircumcise” himself under the old covenant. It simply cannot be done. Once baptism has been experienced, the person is sealed in covenant relation with God for life. Indeed, by renouncing his baptism a person may call down the curses of the covenant on himself. But he can never escape the bond of the covenant once it has been instituted.

If baptism symbolizes the cleansing necessary for entrance into the covenant, the Lord’s Supper serves as the sign of continuation in the covenant. Ongoing participation in the Passover meal identified a person as a member of the externally constituted people of God under the old covenant. In the same way, ongoing participation in the Lord’s Supper serves to identify a person as a member of the externally constituted people of God under the new covenant. Paul’s determination to exclude a man living in sexual immorality emphasizes this point while simultaneously connecting Passover with the Lord’s Supper. The Apostle says: “Get rid of the old yeast ... For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival [of unleavened bread] ... Expel the wicked man from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:7, 13).

May a sacrament be celebrated outside the worship services of the church? Not properly. These signs of the covenant are intended to be experienced in the corporate community of God’s people. A person enters into the fellowship of the body of believers by his baptism. How can he be initiated into this fellowship in the absence of the community? A person is sealed in his continuation in the body of believers by the Lord’s Supper. How can he receive the seal of continuation in this fellowship while being absent from the fellowship? If a person is sick or shut in, let a representative group of the church join with the pastor in a visitation. Let them join together with an abbreviated service of worship that can provide a proper framework for the celebration of the sacrament. But to treat the sacrament as a privilege to be experienced in private or by bride and groom alone at a wedding ceremony goes against its foundational nature as a celebration of participation in the body of Christ.

So the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated regularly as a vital part of the worship of believers. Their constant experience serves to regularly unite the whole body.

## **7. Giving**



One final element of worship is commanded in Scripture: Giving. The role of giving must always retain its proper place in the worship of the church.

The psalmist repeats the song of David composed for celebration at the triumphal moment of his bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. This dramatic action symbolized the perpetual union of God's throne with Messiah's throne. David declares:

*Ascribe to the Lord,*

*O families of nations*

*Ascribe to the Lord*

*glory and strength;*

*Ascribe to the Lord*

*the glory due to his name;*

Bring an offering,

and come into his courts

(Psalm 96:7–8; cf. 1 Chronicles 16:28–29).

When you approach the Lord on his exalted throne in worship, give him the “glory” due to his name. This “glory” manifests itself concretely in his possession of unlimited riches, since he is the ultimate owner of the wealth of the world. In your worship, you can do no more and you should do no less than present to him a portion of what he already possesses. Yet how shameful to come before the Almighty Lord without proper tribute!

Whenever you come to worship, always present an offering to him. Never let the offering plate pass you without contributing something to honor him. It's a vital part of every worship service. Just as you always listen with an active faith to every sermon and participate fully in every prayer during worship, so join with all the saints in every offering as an act of worship in which you present your tribute as a token symbolizing the consecration to him of all you are and have.

Paul was quite explicit in exercising his apostolic authority when he set the pattern for giving in the churches of the new covenant:

*“Now about the collection for the saints. Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money as his way has gone well, putting it in the treasury, so that when I come no collections will have to be made”* (1 Corinthians 16:1–2).

Regularity in the presentation of offerings during worship on the first day of the week is the apostolic pattern set for all the churches in all places and in all ages. This principle applies to all God’s people, rich or poor. Proportionate giving by all on each and every Sunday is the universal way in which the Lordship of Christ is concretely acknowledged on his worship-day. This worshipful honoring of God will prove to be an economic blessing not only for your church and your community. It will also bring countless blessings to you yourself. For among other things, setting a priority on worshipping the Lord with your possessions is the surest way to maintain order in your personal finances. But more importantly, it sets a proper priority for all life’s experiences.

## **Conclusion**

So these seven elements represent the proper way to “Worship According to the Word:”

1. Singing
2. Reading of Scripture
3. Prayer
4. Personal Testimony and Confession of Faith
5. Preaching
6. Sacraments
7. Giving

With these elements in place, little room will be left for the introduction of non-biblical patterns of worship. But the omission of any of these elements invites misdirected substitutes to rush in and fill the vacuum:

1. Is there no congregational singing of substantial psalms, hymns and spiritual songs comparable in richness to the message of the psalter? Then glitzy entertainment will fill the void.
2. Is there no rich and regular reading of Scripture? Then the personal pronouncements of the preacher's pet program along with a plethora of congregational announcements will assume the Bible's place of priority.
3. Is there no prayer that contains the elements of proper praise to God, confession of sin, expression of thanks, intercession for the world, and petition for the people's needs? Then a shallow serving-up of short, childish, self-centered prayers will leave the church and the world untouched by the power of God.
4. Is there no public testimony and profession of the faith? Then an alien call will go forth for faith in a nebulous belief that easily embraces anything and everything while at the same time consists of nothing.
5. Is there no true and faithful preaching of the Word of God written? Then a popular preacher or a false prophet who pleases men rather than God will dominate the church.
6. Is there no proper celebration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper? Then superstition, witchcraft, immorality and disorder will find a foothold in the church.
7. Is there no orderly presentation and distribution of offerings to the Lord for the spread of the gospel and the building of his kingdom? Then a prosperity gospel that promotes personal wealth and health, particularly for the preacher, will prevail.

Worship According to the Word makes a huge difference in the life of every church. This difference will be clearly seen in the health of the church and its impact on the world. May the God of all grace enable his people to experience the fullness of his blessing as they gather for proper, biblical worship in every corner of each country throughout the world.

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This excerpt is taken from O. Palmer Robertson, *Preaching Made Practical* (Evangelical Press: Welwyn Garden City, 2015), 181 - 207.