

The Sixteen Acts of Worship

Good morning, class. I think we've had some fabulous worship services these last few weeks, don't you? The class nods vigorously. *I mean, the worship committee has really some extra effort in these last several weeks, and I can really tell the difference.*

Charles, one of the committee members, is on the front row and beaming. Worship committee members don't usually get much praise.

I'd like to make a list of some of the exciting things that have been happening in our worship lately. The teacher walks to the board and picks up a marker.

One of the students in back joins in. "We had two couples place membership!"

That's right. What else?

Another student speaks up. "We had a baptism last week. And Gloria came forward a week or two ago and asked for prayers."

"And we had a couple of members confess sin and repent," adds a third student.

The teacher writes on the board—

- Confess Jesus
- Baptism
- Place membership
- Request prayer.
- Confess sin.
- Repent.

Wow! That's a lot. What else happened in, oh, I don't know, this morning's service? Let's get the obvious ones out of the way.

Pretty soon, the class lists these additional items—

- Pray
- Preach
- Communion
- Give

- Sing

All right, but that's not all. What else did we do this morning?

“Oh!” one woman adds. “We had announcements! I hate announcements. They seem to last forever!” The class laughed loudly. They obviously felt the same way.

“And we had a time of fellowship. We stopped and shook hands and greeted the people near us,” another student adds.

And didn't we have a scripture reading? And an invitation?

“Well, that's part of the sermon,” one class member objects.

No, someone else read the passage, and while the reading usually goes along with the sermon, it doesn't always. I'm going to write it down—but you don't have to put in your notes if you disagree.

- Make announcements
- Extend the invitation
- Fellowship
- Scripture reading

What about last Sunday night?

“Well, we had a mission report.”

The teacher writes—

- Testimony

“That wasn't testimony,” another member objects. “It was more like a sermon!”

No, our missionary simply told what Jesus was doing in Russia today. The only “lesson” was his telling us what happened. He didn't quote scripture. He didn't draw a moral. He just said: this is what happened in Russia this last year—and it was powerful!

Now, the teacher asks the class, are any of these things unscriptural. Has Charles been obeying the Bible? Or is he having us act in the worship service without authority?

Charles, fortunately, has developed a thick skin being on the worship committee, so he isn't as defensive as you might expect. (The teacher had warned him this was coming).

Is it okay to baptize or extend the “right hand of fellowship” or say what Jesus is doing in Russia during the assembly?

“Of course,” several class members say. One woman is particularly agitated. “How can be wrong to baptize someone at church?” She seems to think the teacher is the stupidest man alive and wasting her time.

I count 16 different things—16 acts of worship. The teacher smiles, waiting for a reaction. *I was always taught we can only have five! And not just any five—it has to be these special five listed here in the middle of the board.* He draws a circle around “Pray, Preach, Communion, Give, Sing.” *But we do at least 11 more things!*

Some of the class reacts to this thought without noticeable concern, but a few are visibly bothered. Eventually, a man on the side of classroom farthest from the door speaks. “Some of these things can be combined as part of the sermon. People come forward to be baptized or confess sin or ask for prayer in response to the sermon. And the invitation is certainly part of the sermon! I don’t think you have 16 distinct acts of worship at all!”

You may be right. It may be a smaller number. But it’s not five. There’s no way this list reduces down to five.

I know for a fact that the people who came forward were all planning to do so before the sermon. They’d all met with the elders or the preacher in advance, and we knew they were coming forward.

If the preacher were to ever skip the invitation, no one would say to him “You didn’t finish your sermon” or “Your sermon is too short.” They’d say, “You forgot to extend the invitation.” In fact, I’ve been in services where the invitation was offered at a separate time from the sermon! So, maybe it’s 15 or 14, but it’s still a whole lot more than five.

Now, consider this. I’ve always been taught that it’s a sin to add anything to the five acts of worship. There are a number of arguments on instrumental music, for example, but one popular one is that it’s an addition to worship that has no authority. So I guess we need to ask: is their scriptural authority for each of these? How about baptism?

The woman with the your-the-stupidest-man-on-earth look says, “The Bible plainly commands us to seek and save the lost!”

True, but does it say to baptize people during the assembly? Why not wait until later, like we do when the Freed-Hardeman chorus is in town and we can’t let them sing during church because it would be unauthorized? We could wait, you know. And we could wait to do a lot of these things.

Does anyone know when we first started having people come forward during church? No one answers.

In the 19th Century. It’s a practice that was unknown to the church until about 150 or 200 years ago. It’s known to historians as “frontier revivalism.” The idea is to

center the entire service on the sermon, with the music and Bible reading and such all pointed to encouraging people to come forward and accept “the invitation.” Before then, the assembly was pointed more toward the members, whereas in the 19th Century, the sermon was often focused on the unconverted or the backslider. It was a big change in how church was done.

Now, I’m not saying it’s wrong. But no one has any evidence that this was a First Century practice.

If it’s not First Century practice, where do we find authority for this to be part of the assembly? I mean, there are lots of things we are authorized to do, but relatively few we can do in the assembly. I doubt that Jesus meant for us to hold our building committee meetings or to do our cooking for Meals on Wheels during church!

The class is now reeling. The ideas are coming fast, and they are struggling to reconcile what they’ve been taught with this information. No one is inclined to ban baptism from worship, but neither can they think of a command, necessary inference, or binding example for using the assembly as a time for baptizing.

I’m sorry if I’m upsetting your equilibrium here, but it’s really worse than you think. The two verses that deal with singing—the verses we use as proof texts to oppose instrumental music—are not specific to the assembly. There are a numerous verses on prayer, but I don’t know a one that commands us to pray when we are assembled. For that matter, the passage in 1 Corinthians that says to set money aside on the first day of the week isn’t referring to giving to the church treasury. It was for a special fund for the church in Jerusalem. There’s plenty of authority for giving to the Lord’s work. There’s nothing for giving to the congregation’s general fund on each Sunday.

However, there are two passages that deal very clearly with what we are to do on Sunday. These aren’t the usual proof texts, but they are undeniably dealing with what to do in the assembly—and we ignore them because they don’t fit our paradigm. Sometimes we only see what we expect to see.

Here’s the first—

(Heb. 10:24-25) And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Plainly, one reason to meet together is to “encourage one another.” To do what, class?

“Love and good deeds,” one member answers.

So, here we have the long-lost scripture that authorizes announcements! The class laughs and then groans. Of course, this only authorizes encouraging announcements—

announcement encouraging good works, volunteering in church work, anything that shows Christian love.

And so, class, according to this verse, how should I decide whether church has been well done on a given Sunday? What's the scriptural test for a proper worship service?

"If I've been encouraged!" a student responds. Several others nod.

Really? Does it say "let us be encouraged"? Take a closer look.

"If we've encouraged someone else!" the student corrects herself.

Exactly. The verb is active. We assemble to encourage others to love and to do good works. There is nothing more holy in an assembly than the times when we recruit others to join in the Lord's work on earth. There nothing more holy than learning who needs to be visited or called or written a note so we can be better encouragers. You see, it's not about me, it's about me being a servant to others.

Now, turn to 1 Corinthians 14. This is a chapter that we're uncomfortable with because it talks about prophecy and speaking in tongues. But it's also the most comprehensive discussion on how to judge what's proper in the assembly.

Paul is confronted with questions about whether to allow tongues or prophecy. We'd expect him to answer with a long speech on commands, necessary inferences, and binding examples. We'd expect him to talk about what is and is not authorized. He might even explain how to understand the silences of the scripture. But he does no such thing. Rather, he tells his readers how to decide what's proper and what's not.

The teacher reads—

(1 Cor 14:2-5) For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

According to this passage, what does God say is the test for whether tongues or prophecy is proper?

The class studies the passage intently. Finally, someone speaks up. "Whether it edifies!"

Right. What else?

“Whether it strengthens, encourages, or comforts.”

Exactly. This sounds a lot like Hebrews doesn't it? These guys seem to have been inspired by the same Spirit! Paul could have just said, "God doesn't want to hear tongues on Sunday morning!" or "Here are the rules. Learn them! Obey them!" But Paul instead goes to the trouble of explaining his reasoning. He doesn't just lay down arbitrary rules. Rather, he gives reasons. Why?

“So the church will know how to address other questions that come up in the future,” an older member says.

Excellent! Now, there's just one more point and the lesson's done.

(1 Cor 14:23-25) So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? 24 But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, 25 and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

Paul has said that we must first consider the members of the congregation in a very practical way. Does the proposed practice edify, strengthen, comfort, or encourage? If so, it's acceptable. If not, not. But now he addresses the possibility that unbelievers may be present. What's the rule when we have unbelievers in the assembly?

“We shouldn't let them think we're crazy!” a student says, and class laughs.

“Well, I guess we can't ever have any visitors!” another student adds, and the class laughs again.

That's the point, isn't it? We aren't to embarrass the cause of Christ in the assembly. Unbelievers will judge us, and they'll judge us by their own standards. If we use words they don't understand or if we are rude and inconsiderate, we may cost our visitors their very souls!

The assembly is foremost for the encouragement and edification of the members. It's for us. It's not a show for visitors. We need the encouragement, and if we serve only the visitors, we'll lose something very important.

But if we forget the visitors, then we've acted very unspiritually as well. The assembly is not for the lost, but for the saved, but it's to be visitor sensitive.

And so, to wrap up, we've not limited ourselves to five acts of worship in 150 years. Any argument built on five-and-only-five acts of worship is just wrong. Fortunately, we have clear and simple, common sense, practical, gracious guidance on how to conduct our services and what God wants us to do.

First, we need to be busy being encouragers and edifiers. We can't hire the preacher to do our Christianity for us. We need to each encourage and build up our brothers and sisters.

Second, the test of good Sunday is whether God has given us the opportunity to be encouragers—not whether the preacher has tickled our funny bone or the song leader has picked our favorite song. In fact, we should be asking the song leader to lead songs that encourage others—not ourselves— because this is one way to encourage others.

Third, we need to clean up our act and be sensitive to the visitors so that they will fall down and glorify God. The goal isn't to astound them with our education, but to show Jesus in a way that touches the hearts of everyone there, including visitors.

I'll see you next week.