



“Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Corinthians 14:40).

Ritual in Worship

Central Truth: Worship ceremonies must be reverent and orderly.

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Topic: Worship.

When the apostle Paul wrote about the order of service in Christian worship, the Holy Spirit directed him to instruct us, *“Let all things be done decently and in order”* (I Corinthians 14:40). That is a requirement that everything done in the worship of God must be in a proper and orderly way. In other words, each part of the service should have a purpose and should be done as unto the Lord and in the presence of the Lord.

Careful and prayerful planning must precede each worship service. Scriptures to be read and songs to be sung should be selected well in advance. Every song should be rehearsed and every Scripture should be read over and over until it can be read with dignity and meaning. There should be a time to sing, a time to pray, a time to receive the offering, a time for the sermon, and a time for the appeal—all planned in advance. Those who present a special message in music (solo or choral group) must have prepared well in advance and sing only those songs which are appropriate to the worship of God.

Old Testament worship was structured. God himself designed the rituals to be followed. There was a time for sacrifice and a prescribed way to do it. There was a time for singing and leaders to direct it, along with instrumental and choral groups to perform it. Each person knew the part he was to have in the worship, and he filled it before the Lord.

There is nothing “spiritual” about an unplanned worship service. God is God, and He deserves our best in worship. A dead ritual does not honor Him. Neither does an unplanned service. *“Let all things be done decently and in order.”*

I. THE PLACE OF RITUAL

God had a certain place where His people were to meet to worship Him. He said, *“I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar . . . And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God”* (Exodus 29:44, 45). God promised to dwell among His people and to meet them at His house and before His altar.

Is there a place where God meets His people today? Yes. He meets in the assembly of the saints. The group does not have to be large, for He has promised, *“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them”* (Matthew 18:20). God is not limited to the church building, of course. All of heaven cannot contain Him, and the whole earth is but a footstool for Him; so how could one building contain Him? He is personally present in every place at every moment. But He promises to manifest His presence among His people when they assemble together in His name.

A part of Christian ritual in worship, therefore, is to have a specific place where you meet God. Another part is to have a definite time when you gather before Him. That means the assembly of your church on the Lord's Day is a part of your ritual of worship. He sanctifies that place and that day, for there He meets with His people.

II. THE DETAIL OF RITUAL

Read Exodus 29:38-42 and notice how detailed God was in giving the ritual to be followed in ancient Hebrew worship. He specified what was to be offered (two lambs), when they were to be offered (one in the morning and one in the evening of each day), what was to accompany their sacrifice (flour and wine), how much flour and wine was to be offered (one-fourth part), where it was to be offered (at the door of the tabernacle), who was to offer it (Aaron and his sons), what would happen when it was offered (He would meet with them), and the goal of their offerings (that they might know that He is the Lord their God). What amazing detail!

In view of such detailed ritual as God decreed to be followed in the worship of Him in ancient times, how can we justify a careless approach to the worship of God today? God himself ordained order in worship. Carelessness before Him is a sign of a spirit of irreverence.

What church would want a preacher who gave no thought or prayer to his sermon until time came for him to preach? What church would want a

music leader who gave no thought or prayer to his songs until time came for him to begin the service? It must not be. God deserves better than that. A faithful preacher or song leader will always seek to improve his ministry before the Lord. A well-planned order of service will improve the quality of our worship services.

Some churches have so structured their services that little inspiration is left in them. But the typical church does not have that problem. It needs more prayerful planning. The songs, Bible readings, and sermon should follow the same theme and present the message God has given the worship leaders. The preacher should notify the music leader of the sermon theme, and the music program should be built around it. That not only provides for orderliness, but it also enables time for rehearsal and prayer over what is offered to the Lord in worship.

III. THE RESPONSE TO RITUAL

A structured order of service will quench the Holy Spirit's work among the people, won't it? Not at all. It rather gives the Spirit freedom to work.

Look at the response God promised to give to ancient worshipers. As they followed the detailed order which He ordained, He said, "*I will meet; . . . I will sanctify; . . . I will dwell*" (Exodus 29:43-45). That doesn't sound like an order of service hindered God's involvement, does it? An orderly service arouses reverence for God in the hearts of people and assists them in their communion with God.

God himself told us how to worship Him. Our worship is to be appropriate to the person of God and orderly in our approach to Him. When it is decent and in order, He is magnified. Such worship befits Him who is God over all gods and King over all kings. Those principles apply to Christian worship the same as to Jewish worship.

God meets with people, sanctifies the people and place, and dwells with those who approach Him in a reverent and orderly spirit. Isn't that what you want to happen in your worship? Then take care that you plan before you appear before the Lord.

A period of quietness before a worship service begins is good preparation to meet God. Boisterous talk and secular conversations are not conducive to an awareness of the presence of God. The most important thing that happens in the assembly of your church is your meeting with God. Everything done in God's house should contribute to that end.

IV. THE GOAL OF RITUAL

“They will know that I am the LORD their God, . . . That I may dwell among them” (Exodus 29:46). What a worthy goal of a Christian worship service! I would be delighted, as a pastor, if I knew that every worship service ended with my people's awareness that the infinite God is their personal God and that He is with them personally and permanently. A well-planned worship service can contribute to that realization. An unplanned service may not quicken that awareness.

Please understand that the appeal of this study is to worship God *“decently and in order”* (I Corinthians 14:40). It is not a recommendation for high liturgy or formal prayers. Since God is God, we must approach Him with all the reverence due His majestic person. *“Prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you”* (I Samuel 7:3). Preparing the heart is vital to worship *“in spirit and in truth”* (John 4:24).

What impression will our children get of the Lord if we are haphazard in our worship of Him? What are we saying to fellow Christians about our reverence toward the Lord if we come carelessly before Him? What are we indicating to God if we approach Him with prayers and praises without forethought? How does your worship testify to your relationship with God?

Every church has some kind of an “order of service.” The appeal of this study is that the order of service be orderly, uncluttered, and appropriate to the worship of God. A good rule of thumb to evaluate your worship is to answer this question: “Is this the way we would conduct our service if we could see God personally present?” He is there! Let us worship like it.