

How Does a New Testament Church Worship?

“For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24 NLT)

Good morning! Happy New Year! It’s been a year since we saw each other and I missed you all.

The new year always brings to us some sense of anxiety and excitement at the same time. We don’t know what’s in store for us, but we look forward to the challenges that lie before us. After all, we really don’t need to fear the future because God is waiting for us in the future. Amen? As the saying goes, “I don’t know what the future holds but I know who holds the future.” Listen, God not only holds the future, but he holds you as well. He will guide you and direct you and tell you whether to turn to the right or to the left only if you would let him.

Speaking of the future, I’d like us to look together to the future as a church. I believe the Lord is doing something in this church, Amen? I believe he has great things in store for us. I believe he wants us to catch a vision because he wants us to be a church that will make a difference in our community in his name, Amen?

Would you like to be a church like that? Would you like to be a church that will make known the goodness of God and the saving grace of the Lord Jesus?

If we want to be a church that will make an impact on others, we have to look at what made the early church click. We have to discover the secret of her success. We have to see why the early church grew in leaps and bounds and became a force so strong that it took the world by storm. So, I’d like to start off this year by going through Church 101.

We’re going to start a new series this morning focusing on the things that will make our church like a New Testament church. I’ve entitled this series **“Becoming Like a New Testament Church”**. Much of the material I’m going to share is from Rick Warren’s book Purpose-Driven Church.

He's my mentor although he doesn't know it. So what I've learned from him I want to pass on to you. I can't be original all the time. Anyway, the Bible says, "There is nothing new under the sun." It just gets recycled.

Now, we all want to see our church grow numerically and spiritually, right? It is God's will for our church to grow spiritually as well as numerically. In Acts 2, we read of a vibrant body of believers that was unified in purpose, the Lord Jesus was magnified and the result was the church multiplied. It had a powerful witness among non-believers too. Miracles and the exercise of spiritual gifts were the norm. It is easy to see why the church grew so quickly and consistently.

Why was the early church so dynamic in comparison to the church of 2019? The reason was because it was a balanced church. A church that puts equal emphasis on each of the purposes of the church which Jesus intended it to fulfill. What are these purposes? **Worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and evangelism.** Sound familiar? If you've taken Class 101, yes, they do sound familiar.

In the next few weeks, we're going to talk about each purpose of the church much more in detail. This morning, let me start by discussing what I consider the most important purpose, which is Worship. The title of this message is **"How Does a New Testament Church Worship?"** Let us read together the passage on which this message is based on, John 4:24, **"For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."** (John 4:24 NLT)

If you were able to take a trip in a time machine, and travel to the first century, I wonder what the early church would have looked like. We do not have any recorded worship service or agenda. Nor were any instructions given by the apostles as to how a worship service should be conducted. However, the new Testament provides us with clues as to **what a first century church worship service might have looked like:**

1. First, the early church by and large met on the first day of the week, which was Sunday. For example, the apostle Paul instructed Christians to set aside a collection on Sundays. “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” (1 Cor.16:2)

2. The early believers met together and worshipped in individual homes.

“Greet also the church that meets at their house.” (Romans 16:5)

3. Local gatherings were relatively small in number, with 12-20 on average in each meeting house.

“Church historians agree that house churches could rarely have been more than 15 or 20 people—simply because they took place in small apartments. The vast majority of people, perhaps as many as 90 percent, lived in apartments of one or two rooms crowded above or behind shops. Once a house church grew larger than that, it multiplied by simply starting another house church nearby.” – Christianity Today International, *What Was the New Testament Church Like?*

4. Each church was led by a pastor or elder and deacons who gave oversight to the spiritual and material needs of the members. - Acts 6; 1 Tim. 2

5. There was no set order of service, but on any given meeting you could expect the following:

- They would share a common meal together. 1 Cor.11
- There would be singing or reciting of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Eph.5:19; Col.3:16
- A teaching elder would teach the word. Acts 5:42; 19
- Prayer was said. Acts 4:31
- The exercise of spiritual gifts was a normal occurrence. Acts 13:1; 1 Cor.12-14

- Breaking of bread and communion was held every time the believers met together. Acts 2:46; 1 Cor.11
- Giving of tithes and offerings. Acts 5; 2 Cor.8

There is no recorded agenda or order of service. I believe the Holy Spirit deliberately kept this a secret because he did not want the successive generations to feel in bondage to form. As we endeavor to seek God's will in worship, there are two things we need to keep in mind. Two things that Jesus told the Samaritan woman he came to meet one day. The story is found in John 4. So, please get your Bibles and open to John chapter 4. I'm using the New Living Translation of the Bible this afternoon.

The encounter began when Jesus was traveling through Samaria. The people of Samaria were enemies of the people of Israel. Both sides thought they were the true heirs of the covenant with Abraham and each thought only they truly worshiped God the right way.

Jesus stops to get a drink from a well. He meets a woman there and begins a conversation with her. It becomes apparent to the woman that Jesus is a great prophet because Jesus knows everything about her life.

She seizes the moment to ask a question that has bugged her for a long time. So, we now come down to verse 20 where she says, "So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?" Her question basically was "Who's got it right?"

In verse 21 through 24, Jesus answers her saying, "Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews. But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will

worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” What was Jesus saying here? What does that mean - to worship in spirit and in truth?

First, let’s look at **what worship is not.**

1. Worship is not about a place.

Jesus is clear, it doesn’t matter where you worship God. Before Jesus came, the Jews and the Samaritans thought that they haven’t worshipped if they haven’t gone to the temple in Jerusalem or to the temple in Mount Gerizim. They thought that it was where they can meet God and so their worship was limited to one place. No, no, Jesus says, God is a Spirit. God is not a person with a physical body that he is confined in one place. God is everywhere.

Worship is not about a place.

2. Worship is not about style.

The Samaritans were known to worship God in a lively and emotional manner. They clap, they shout, they play instruments loudly. I imagine some of them even cry, kneel, raise their hands, and what have you. Sounds like Pentecostals. Nothing wrong with that. The Jews, meanwhile, did the opposite. They were formal, ritualistic, and to the point of being as routine as lacing their sandals or washing their hands. Sounds like Baptists. Nothing wrong with that either. BTW, we’re neither Pentecostals nor Baptists. We’re Bapcticostals. Anyway, the Jews and Samaritans thought there was only one style of worshipping God.

Today, as we know, there are also different styles of worship. Traditional, contemporary, blended, and so on and so forth. But God isn’t concerned about style. He doesn’t favor one over the other. Each style is important as long as it is reaching someone.

As I was preparing for this message, I chanced upon a web site of a church that said that singing a capella is the only biblical way to worship God. Well, one positive thing about that is they save money because they don't have to spend on instruments. Tita Annie, what do you think?

Worship is not about a place, not about style.

3. Worship is not about rituals.

Both Samaritans and Jews strictly observed certain rituals in their worship. They tell people what to wear, what to do, and what to say. Everything was done in a prescribed manner.

But God isn't concerned about whether we follow a set pattern of behavior and appearance when we worship. He wants us to freely express ourselves in worship. Worship is not about rituals.

True, authentic worship is not any of the above. They are part of worship but to put emphasis on any of these is missing the whole point about worship.

That was how they worshipped before Jesus came. But now, he wants to set things right. So, he says to the Samaritan woman, "If you really want to worship God, worship him in spirit and in truth.

So, now, according to Jesus this is what worship is.

1. You Worship in Spirit

The word 'spirit' does not refer to the Holy Spirit but to the human spirit. Jesus is saying that a person must worship not simply outwardly like being concerned about the place, the style, the ritual, but inwardly, which pertains to the proper attitude of the heart.

In short, he's saying, "If you truly want to worship God, be real, be genuine." Being genuine means not faking your worship. Or giving the appearance of worship. For example, some come to church just because they want to feel good about themselves. "I hope they notice that I'm in church today.

I just want them to see how spiritual I am.” Some come to church because they want to impress others. “I’m gonna wear that pretty clothes I bought yesterday and greet everyone so everyone can see it.”

Yes, everyone can see it but God can see further than that. God can see the heart. God knows when our hearts are not right. God knows when we’ve come to church not to worship him but to worship ourselves. The problem with some people is that they’re more concerned about the externals rather than what’s inside. They’re more concerned about the form than the substance.

What does the Bible say? *“Man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart.”* (1 Sam. 16:7)

God is looking for worshippers who will worship with sincere hearts. True worship, therefore, takes place in the heart not in a building. It isn’t about a place. There is no appointed place or time, but a humble spirit is required.

Unfortunately, some of the coldest and unmeaningful worship can take place in a church building. And some of the most meaningful worship can take place in the strangest of places like a prison cell in Philippi where Paul and Barnabas were being held prisoner.

It is dangerous to think that we have to be in a church building to worship, as if picking up a songbook, saying a few prayers, listening to a sermon and taking communion automatically means we have worshiped. Those things can take place and only be a shell, an unmeaningful shell. This building is not a magical place. It might facilitate our worship, aid us in worship, but so may your closet. But it does not make what we do worshipful any more than the movie theater or the ball field or our own family rooms.

True worship takes place anywhere. There’s a woman in Cincinnati who had this plaque over her kitchen sink, "Worship conducted here three times daily."

God desires anyone who will worship Him in spirit. But He also desires that we worship Him in truth. What is that all about?

2. You Worship in Truth.

Worship in truth involves two things. First,

A. It involves accuracy. It means knowing what God has revealed about Himself. Not just having our own idea of what God is like or what we wish He is like, but honestly searching His word to find out who He is and what He has done, being aware that he is our creator and Ruler, our redeemer, our savior.

This is where the Samaritans got it wrong. They were sincere about their worship, but they had bad information about God to base it on. Sincerity alone does not make for acceptable worship.

The Jewish leaders, on the other hand, made the opposite mistake. They had all the truthful information about God, but they often lacked sincerity of heart.

Some years back the Chicago Tribune reported the story of a New Mexico woman who was frying tortillas when she noticed that the skillet burns on one of her tortillas resembled the face of Jesus. Excited, she showed it to her husband and neighbors, and they all agreed that there was a face etched on the tortilla and that it truly bore a resemblance to Jesus.

So the woman went to her priest to have the tortilla blessed. She testified that the tortilla had changed her life, and her husband agreed that she had been a more peaceful, happy, submissive wife since the tortilla had arrived. The priest, not accustomed to blessing tortillas, was somewhat reluctant but agreed to do it.

The woman took the tortilla home, put it in a glass case with piles of cotton to make it look like it was floating on clouds, built a special altar for it, and opened the little shrine to visitors.

Within a few months, more than eight thousand people came to the shrine of the Jesus of The Tortilla, and all of them agreed that the face in the burn marks on the tortilla was the face of Jesus (except for one reporter who said he thought it looked like former heavy-weight boxing champion Leon Spinks!)

Is the shrine still there? Unfortunately or fortunately, in late 2005, Mrs. Rubio's granddaughter took the Miracle Tortilla into school for Show and Tell, and it was dropped and broken! The shrine has been closed and the remains retired to a drawer in the Rubio's home.

No one can doubt the sincerity of this woman. But she missed something important - the truth. The truth that no one really knows for sure how Jesus looked like. And the truth that God doesn't want us to make any representations of him and then to worship that representation. Truth and sincerity must come together to offer an acceptable worship to God.

B. Worship in truth also involves authenticity.

Romans 12:1,2 says that we are to give God our lives as our spiritual service of worship. Worship is not only confined to a place and a time like Sunday morning church, it is a lifestyle. Worship happens here but continues as you go out that door. Worship happens when we live out what we say we believe. Worship happens when you are careful with the language you use at work or at home. Worship is happening when you take the time to visit a lonely person. Worship happens when you share a bit of your faith with someone. Worship happens when you decide not to watch that movie that mocks a pure lifestyle. Worship happens whenever you present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice to God because of who He is and what He has done. In short, worship happens when you're not living a lie.

When Mahatma Gandhi was a young man, he went to England to finish his studies. There, he lived with a couple.

This couple were Christians and so they took along Gandhi with them every Sunday to church. After church, however, this husband and wife, revert back to their old ways like quarreling, gossiping, and things like that. Later on, Gandhi remarked that he admired Christ but not Christians. This was his stumbling block.

A true worshipper lives an authentic Christian life.

Brothers and sisters, the early church worshipped in spirit and truth. That's why the church grew, that's why they made a great impact. I hope we can be that kind of church.

But, folks, I want us to see something else here. What we see is the experience of a woman who desired to draw near to God. There was a hunger inside of her. She wanted to worship God and she was eagerly waiting for the Messiah. She knew the Messiah held the key to getting close to God. Then, Jesus revealed himself to her. Now, look at verse 26, he says to her, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

Imagine the joy she must have felt. Imagine how grateful she was for having a relationship with the Messiah right there and then. In her excitement, she told others about Jesus. Word spread about Jesus and many people were drawn to Jesus because the woman drew near to God first.

Folks, these two events are what I would like us to focus on this year. I have drawn our theme for this year from these two eventful moments – the Samaritan woman drawing near to God and in the process people were drawn near to God as well. So, our theme for this year is this,

"Draw Near to God, Draw People Near". (John 4:24, 39)

What I'm saying is, as you draw near to God, as you learn more about him, as you grow in your relationship with him, you will draw others near to God. Your life, your testimony, your witness will become the net that will capture everyone's hearts to the Savior.

That's why our series will focus on the five purposes of the church. Each purpose is designed to draw you nearer and nearer to God which will transform your life and make others notice which hopefully make them want what you have.

The question is, like the Samaritan woman, "Do you have a relationship with the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you know him in a personal way? Not just in your head, but in your heart? Do you worship him in spirit and in truth?"

Do you believe that he died for you, and he was buried, and resurrected for you? Jesus loves you. He is the Messiah, the Savior whom you've been waiting for.

He wants to give you the best in this life and a better life in the future. If you already have a relationship with Jesus, well and good. Please cultivate that relationship. Please make that relationship grow. Please draw nearer and nearer to Jesus every day. And then, reach out to others. Tell others about Jesus and what he has done for you. Be like the Samaritan woman who desired to worship God and desired others to do the same.