

Jesus Didn't Play the Guitar

Since 1970, when I first became aware of these matters, I have heard an increasing emphasis in church circles on the importance of worship. It seems to get more pronounced each year.

This is strange, since Jesus never raised the subject of worship with the twelve. If it is so important, why the silence on his part?

He had lots to teach them about loving their enemies, seeking first the kingdom of God, making disciples of all nations, and of his church battering down the gates of hell to set the captives free (1). Yes he taught in the synagogues, but that was to reach the people who wanted to follow God. The stories in the gospels of times when he attended the synagogue are included to show him healing someone on the Sabbath and the like, to the fury of the religious leaders. They are not there to rubber stamp Sunday morning gatherings.

I believe gathering together for worship is at best a distraction and at worst an act of disobedience for those who want to follow Jesus.

By now, if you are like I was thirty years ago, Bible passages will be rushing into your head that seem to contradict my view. The purpose of this article is to examine some of those briefly.

1. *What about Hebrews 10:25, where we are told to meet together to encourage one another?* Look at verses 24 and 25 and you will see that worship is not mentioned. The purpose of the meeting is to encourage one another in showing love and good deeds. Church gatherings should have this focus.
2. *But the Psalms are full of worship!* Yes, there are many encouragements to praise the Lord in the Psalms. So what? Are we followers of Jesus? Shouldn't his teaching take priority? Yes, especially since his closing words to the twelve were 'teach them to observe what I have commanded you', and when he breathed on them to receive the Holy Spirit, he said 'as the father sent me, so I sent you'. Followers of Jesus should follow Jesus to the letter (2).
3. *But he told us to worship the father in Spirit and in Truth.* Read John chapter four carefully, and you will see that the Samaritan woman raised the subject of worship in an attempt to get the subject away from her disobedience to God's commands. Jesus had been speaking to her about her relationships with men. So when he said that the worshippers the father wants are those who worship in spirit and in truth, he was pointing out to her that a person who is breaking one of God's foremost commands should change their ways before talking about worship. As John put it in his first letter, we worship God by obeying his commands (3). Jesus went on to reveal where his passion lay a few minutes later. "I have food to eat of which you know nothing," he told the disciples when they returned from the village. "It is meat and drink for me to do my father's will until I have finished his work." Obedience to God was what he cared about (4).
4. *Paul encouraged the Ephesians to sing psalms hymns and spiritual songs to one another (5:19).* This is a disappointing translation of the Greek. It ought to be translated 'to yourselves' (Greek *eautois*). 'To one another' happens to occur in verse 21 (Greek *allelouis*). If Paul meant 'to one

another' in verse 19, he would have used *allelois*. The picture we have here is of someone humming a spiritual song as they go about their daily life rather than an encouragement to gather for worship. Note also that our worship services don't even follow the mistranslation, as we don't sing the songs to one another but focus on God as we sing.

So what is the place of worship in the Bible? Turn to Revelation chapters four and nineteen. Worship in the Christian era takes place in heaven rather than on earth. When we get to heaven, there will have been an end to sorrow and crying and pain, so the opportunity to obey Jesus will be over, and we will only have worship left to do. While we are on earth, we should follow in Jesus' steps as Peter taught, and do good to all, extending the kingdom of God (5).

If you are not convinced, consider this. During the seventy years I have attended church services, so called, I estimate I have sung twenty-five thousand hymns. Jesus, in contrast, sang just one hymn that we know of (6). It's not right. If we want to be his followers, we need to adopt his focus. What did he actually want his followers to do?

Finally note that the enthusiasm for worship is not confined to Christians. Every religion in the world has its shrines and temples. Bowing down to a god seems to be a universal human trait. Obedience, in contrast, is a rarity.

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1. Matthew 5:44, 6:33, 28:19 and 16:18.
2. Matthew 28:20.
3. 1 John 5:3.
4. John 4:24 & 34.
5. 1 Peter 2:21.
6. Matthew 26:30. The Greek is just one word: 'hymn-sung, they went out...' Hardly a ringing endorsement for the amount of singing we do.